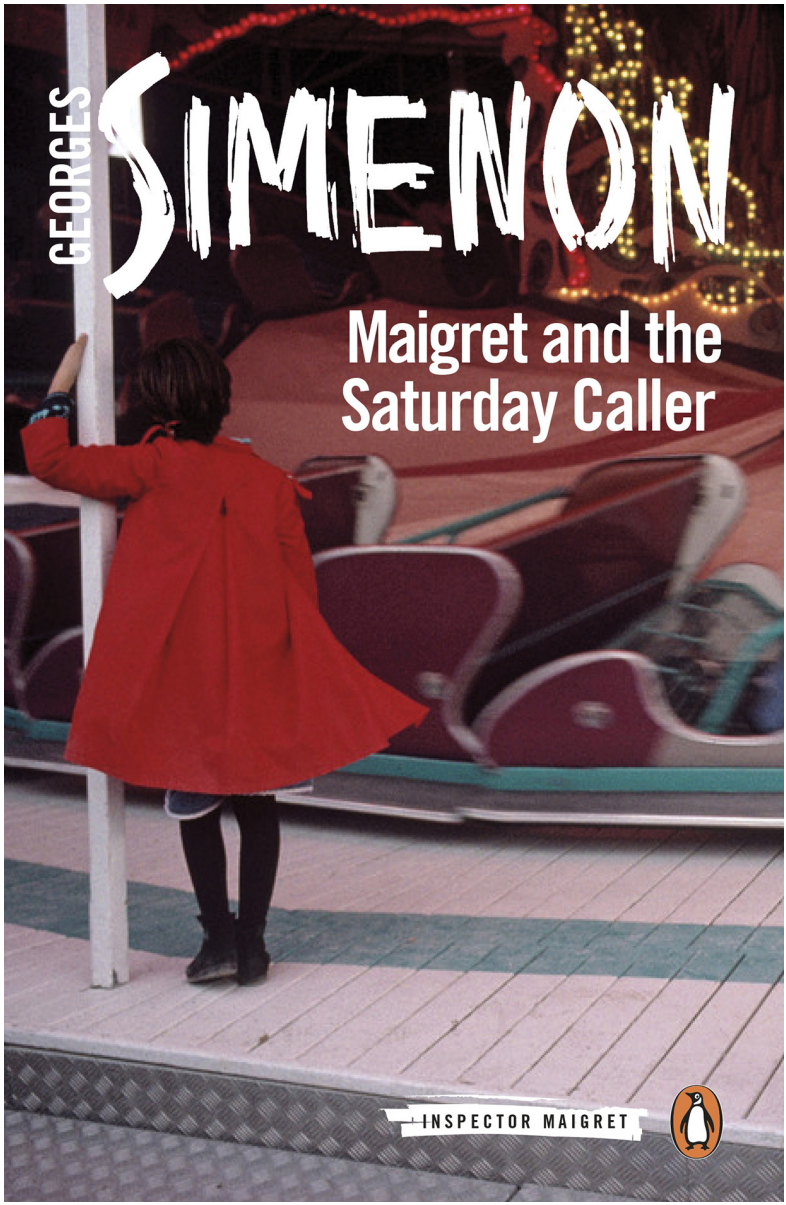
GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and the Saturday Caller
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

Georges Simenon

MAIGRET AND THE SATURDAY CALLER

Translated by SIÂN REYNOLDS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points … 'Understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

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– Independent on Sunday

1.

Some images, for no reason, and without our realizing it, cling on and remain obstinately lodged in our memories, although we are barely conscious of having registered them and they correspond to nothing of significance. So it was that, years later, Maigret could probably have reconstructed, minute by minute, gesture by gesture, that uneventful late afternoon at Quai des Orfèvres.

In the first place, there was the black marble clock with its bronze fittings, on which his gaze had alighted as it showed 6.18, which meant it was actually just after half past six. In ten other offices in the Police Judiciaire, occupied by the chief himself and the other senior inspectors, identical clocks stood flanked by their candelabra and, since time immemorial, they too had run slow.

Why did the thought strike him today, and not any other day? For a moment, he wondered how many administrative centres and ministries had long ago been provided with a whole consignment of these clocks, manufactured by a certain F. Ledent, whose signature in fine running script adorned the pale clock face, and his mind wandered to the negotiations, plots and bribes that would have preceded such an important contract.

F. Ledent had been dead for half a century, possibly even a century, to judge by the style of his clocks.

The desk lamp with its green shade was lit, since it was January. Throughout the building, all the lamps too were the same kind.

Lucas, standing up, was putting into a pale yellow folder the documents that Maigret had passed him, one by one.

'Shall I leave Janvier on duty at the Crillon?'

'Not for too long. Send someone to take over this evening.'

There had recently been, one after another, as often happened, a series of jewel thefts in the grand hotels on the Champs-

Élysées, and in each of them the police had set up discreet surveillance.

Automatically, Maigret pressed his electric bell. The elderly usher, Joseph, with his silver chain of office, appeared at the door at once.

'No one else for me?' the inspector asked.

'Just the madwoman.'

It was of no importance. Some months, she would turn up two or three times a week at Quai des Orfèvres and, without a word, slip into the waiting room, to settle down with her knitting. She never came up to the desk. The first day, Joseph had asked her who she wished to see.

She had smiled at him with an arch, almost mischievous air, and said:

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret will call me when he needs me.'

Joseph had given her a form. She had filled it in with regular convent-educated handwriting. Her name was Clémentine Pholien and she lived in Rue Lamarck.

That time, Maigret had asked Janvier to receive her.

'Have you been summoned?'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret knows

about it.’

‘Did he send you a summons?’

She smiled, a little woman, graceful despite her age.

‘No need for that.’

‘You’ve got something to tell him?’

‘I might have.’

‘He’s very busy just now.’

‘That doesn’t matter. I’ll wait.’

She had waited until seven in the evening, then she had left. They saw her back again a few days later, with the same purple hat, the same knitting, and she took her seat as if she were a regular, in the glass-panelled waiting room.

They had made a few inquiries, just to check. She had run a haberdasher’s in Montmartre for many years, and now had a comfortable income. Her nieces and nephews had several times tried to have her interned in a psychiatric hospital, but on each occasion she had been sent home, on the grounds that she posed no risk to anyone.

Where had she chanced on Maigret’s name? She evidently did not know him by sight, since he had walked several times past the glass partition when she was there, and

she had not recognized him.

‘Very well, Lucas. Time to shut up shop!’

They were going home early, especially for a Saturday. Maigret filled his pipe and fetched his coat, hat and scarf from the cupboard.

He went past the waiting room, turning his head away as a precaution, and once in the courtyard was faced with the yellow-tinged fog that had settled on Paris during the afternoon.

He was in no hurry. The collar of his overcoat turned up, hands in pockets, he made his way round the Palais de Justice, passed under the great clock on the embankment, and crossed the Pont-au-Change. As he reached the middle of the bridge, he suddenly had the feeling he was being followed, and turned round abruptly. There were numerous passers-by in both directions. Nearly everyone, because of the cold, was walking quickly. He was almost sure that a darkly clad man, about ten metres away from him, had suddenly done an about-turn.

He attached no importance to it, and besides it was just an impression.

A few minutes later, he was waiting for his bus in Place du Châtelet, then found enough room on the rear platform to carry on smoking his pipe. Did it really have an unusual taste? He would have sworn it. Perhaps because of the fog, and a certain quality in the air. A very pleasant taste anyway.

He was thinking about nothing in particular, but gazed absent-mindedly at his fellow passengers' heads nodding with the motion of the bus.

Then he was back on the pavement in the almost deserted Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, and glimpsing the lights of his apartment, which he always recognized from a distance. He started up the familiar staircase, saw the strips of light under the doors, heard muffled voices and the sound of radios playing.

The front door opened as usual, before he had touched the handle, and Madame Maigret, silhouetted against the light, put a mysterious finger to her lips.

He looked at her questioningly, trying to see past her.

'There's someone here …' she whispered.

'Who?'

‘I don’t know. He’s a bit odd.’

‘What did he say?’

‘That he absolutely had to speak to you.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘I can’t say exactly, but there’s drink on his breath.’

There was a quiche lorraine for supper, he could tell by the smell from the kitchen.

‘Where is he?’

‘I got him to sit in the front room.’

She took his coat, hat and scarf. The flat seemed less light than usual, but that again was obviously just an impression. With a shrug, he pushed the door of their front room, where for a little over a month now, a television set had been installed in a prominent place.

The man had remained standing in a corner, coat on and hat in hand. He seemed intimidated and hardly dared look at the inspector.

‘Forgive me for following you home,’ he stammered.

Maigret had immediately noticed the man’s hare-lip and was not displeased to find himself at last face to face with this person.

‘You’ve been coming to Quai des Orfèvres

to see me, haven't you?'

'Several times, yes.'

'And your name is … Just a minute … Planchon.'

'Léonard Planchon, yes, that's right.'

And he repeated more and more humbly:

'Forgive me …'

His eyes were roving round the small room, coming to rest on the half-open door, as if he wanted to run away again. How many times had he left like that, without seeing the inspector?

At least five times. Always on a Saturday afternoon. So that they had started calling him 'the Saturday caller'.

It was rather like the case of the madwoman, with variations. The Police Judiciaire, like a newspaper office, attracts all kinds of people who are behaving oddly in some way, and in the end some of them become known and familiar faces.

'I did write to you first,' he murmured.

'Please sit down.'

Through the glass door into the dining room, the table could be seen laid for dinner and the man glanced towards it.

'It's time for your supper, isn't it?'

‘Sit down,’ said Maigret again, with a sigh.

For once he was home early, but his evening meal was going to have to wait. Too bad about the quiche! And the television news! For the last few weeks, he and his wife had adopted the habit of watching television while they ate, which had meant moving to different places at the table.

‘You say you’ve written to me?’

‘At least ten letters.’

‘Signed with your name?’

‘The first ones weren’t signed. I tore them up. Then I tore up the others too. That’s when I decided to come and see you.’

Maigret, too, recognized the smell of alcohol, but the man in front of him was not drunk. Nervous, yes. His clasped fingers were pressed together so tightly that the knuckles were white. Only gradually did he gather enough confidence to look straight at the inspector, and his expression was almost beseeching.

How old was he? Hard to say. Neither young nor old, but he gave the impression of never having been young. Thirty-five?

Nor was it easy to guess the social category to which he belonged. His clothes, although

of poor cut, were of good quality; his hands, while very clean, were those of a manual worker.

'Why did you tear up the letters?'

'I was afraid you'd think I was mad.'

And looking up, with a clear need to convince, he added:

'I'm *not* mad, inspector. I beg you to believe that I'm not mad.'

This was generally a bad sign, yet Maigret was already almost persuaded. He could hear his wife coming and going in the kitchen. She must have taken the quiche out of the oven, but it would in any case be spoiled now.

'So you wrote several letters to me. Then you came to Quai des Orfèvres. On a Saturday, if I remember rightly?'

'It's the only day I'm free.'

'What is it you do, Monsieur Planchon?'

'I've got a painting and decorating business. A very modest one. In the summer, I might have five or six men on the job. You get the idea.'

Because of his hare-lip, it was hard to say whether he was smiling timidly or pulling a disparaging face. His eyes were very light

blue, and he had fair, almost reddish hair.

'The first time you called was about two months ago. You wrote on the form that you wanted to speak to me in person. Why?'

'Because you're the only person I feel I can trust. I read in the papers …'

'Very well. That Saturday, instead of waiting, you left after about ten minutes.'

'I was scared.'

'What of?'

'I told myself you wouldn't take me seriously. Or that you'd stop me doing what I had in mind.'

'You came back the following Saturday …'

'Yes.'

Maigret had been in a meeting that day with the chief of police and two other senior officers. When he had emerged, an hour later, the waiting room was empty.

'Were you still scared?'

'I didn't know …'

'What didn't you know?'

'I didn't know if I wanted to go through with it.'

He rubbed his forehead.

'It's so complicated. You see, there are moments when I lose track …'

Another time, Maigret had sent Lucas to see to him. The man had refused to tell him why he was there, saying that it was personal, then he had literally fled.

‘Who gave you my address?’

‘I followed you. Last Saturday, I nearly came up to you in the street, then I thought that wasn’t the right place. Not for the kind of conversation I wanted to have. Neither was your office. Perhaps you’ll understand …’

‘How did you know, this evening, what time I would be going home?’

And Maigret suddenly recalled the feeling he had had on the Pont-au-Change.

‘You were hiding on the embankment, weren’t you?’

Planchon nodded.

‘You followed me to the bus stop?’

‘Yes. Then I took a taxi and got here a few minutes before you.’

‘You have some problem that’s worrying you, Monsieur Planchon?’

‘Worse than a problem.’

‘How many drinks did you have before coming here?’

‘Two? Maybe three? Before all this, I

hardly touched alcohol, at most a glass of wine with a meal.'

'And now?'

'It depends on the day. Or rather the night, I don't drink on the job. If I had three brandies just now, it was to give me courage. Are you vexed with me?'

Maigret was puffing slowly at his pipe, not taking his eyes off his visitor, trying to form an opinion. He had not yet succeeded. He sensed in Planchon a pathetic side that distracted him. He had the impression of some repressed passion, of some overwhelming distress, accompanied by remarkable patience.

This man, and Maigret would have put his hand in the fire about that, had few social contacts: everything went on inside his head. He had been tormented for two months by the need to talk. He had tried, Saturday after Saturday, to meet the inspector, and every time, he had dodged it at the last moment.

'Why don't you just tell me the whole story?'

Another glance through the door at the dining room, where two places had been laid facing the television.

‘I feel ashamed, I’m holding up your meal. It could take a long time … Your wife will be annoyed with me … Listen, I tell you what, I’ll wait here while you eat. Or I can come back later. Yes, that’s it! I’ll come back later.’

He made to get up, and Maigret obliged him to stay where he was.

‘No, Monsieur Planchon! This time we’re getting to it, aren’t we? Tell me what’s troubling you. Tell me face to face what you wrote in all those letters you tore up.’

Then suddenly, staring at the carpet with its red leaf pattern, the man burst out:

‘I want to kill my wife!’

Immediately, his gaze went to the inspector’s face. Maigret had managed, with some difficulty, not to give a start.

‘You intend to kill your wife?’

‘I’ve got to! There’s no other way out … I don’t know how to explain it to you. Every night, I tell myself it’s going to happen, it’s impossible for it *not* to happen one day or another. So I thought that if I told you about it …’

Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped his spectacles, searching for words, and Maigret noticed that a button of his

jacket was hanging by a thread. Despite his distress, Planchon intercepted the brief glance and smiled, or rather grimaced.

'Yes, that too,' he said bitterly. 'She doesn't even pretend to …'

'Pretend to what?'

'To look after me. To be my wife.'

Was he regretting having come? He was shifting about on the chair, occasionally looking at the door as if he were about to bolt outside.

'I'm wondering if I wasn't wrong to come. But you're the only man in the world I can trust … It seems as if I've known you a long time. I'm almost sure you'll understand.'

'Are you a jealous husband, Monsieur Planchon?'

Their eyes met. Maigret thought he could see complete frankness in the other man's expression.

'Not any more, I think. I *was*. But no. Now, I'm past that …'

'But you want to kill her just the same?'

'Because there's no other solution. So I told myself if I warned you, by letter or in person … First of all, it would be more honest. Then perhaps if I did that, I'd change my mind …

You understand? … No, it's impossible to understand if you don't know Renée. I'm sorry if this is coming out in a muddle. Renée's my wife. My daughter's called Isabelle. She's seven, she's all I have left in the world. You don't have children, I believe?'

He looked around again, as if to check there were no toys lying about, or the many other signs of a child in the house.

'They want to take her from me too. They're doing all they can to manage that. They don't try to hide it … I wish you could see how they treat me. Do you think my mind's disturbed?'

'No.'

'In a way, that might be better? They could lock me up right away. Like they will if I kill my wife. Or if I kill him. Really, to do the job properly, I should kill them both. But if I was in prison, who'd look after Isabelle? You see the problem?

'I've thought up a lot of complicated plans. At least ten, and every time I've worked them out in detail. The main thing was not to get caught. People would just think the two of them had gone away. I read in the paper

that thousands of women go missing every year in Paris alone, and the police don't bother to look for them. And it would be even better if he disappeared at the same time as her …

'You know, I even decided one time where I'd bury their bodies. It was when I was working up at the top of Montmartre, on a site where concrete was being mixed. I'd have taken them there at night, in my van, and nobody would ever have found them.'

He was getting worked up, speaking quite volubly now, but without ceasing to watch Maigret's reactions.

'Has anyone ever come before to tell you he was going to kill his wife, or someone else?'

This was all so unexpected that Maigret found himself searching his memory.

'Not like this,' he admitted finally.

'You think I'm making it up, inventing a story to get your attention?'

'No.'

'You believe I really want to kill my wife?'

'You certainly intended to.'

'And you think I will?'

'No.'

‘Why not?’

‘Because you *have* come to see me.’

Planchon stood up, too nervous and on edge to stay sitting. He threw his arms in the air.

‘Well, that’s what I *told* myself,’ he almost sobbed. ‘That’s why, every time, I went away without being seen. And that’s why I needed to talk to you. I’m not a criminal. I’m an honest man. And yet …’

Maigret got up in turn, went over to the sideboard, fetched the bottle of plum brandy, and poured a glass of it for his visitor.

‘You’re not having any?’ the other murmured shamefacedly.

Then, as he glanced at the dining room:

‘Of course! You haven’t eaten, and here I am talking away, not making sense. I’d like to be able to explain it all to you, but I don’t know where to start.’

‘Would you prefer it if I asked you some questions?’

‘That might be easier.’

‘Sit down, then.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘How long have you been married?’

‘Eight years.’

‘And you lived alone before that?’

‘Yes. I was always alone, after my mother died when I was fifteen. We lived in Rue Picpus, not far from here. She cleaned people’s houses.’

‘And your father?’

‘I never knew him.’

He had reddened.

‘You became an apprentice?’

‘That’s right. I became a house-painter. I was twenty-six when my boss, who lived in Rue Tholozé, discovered he had a bad heart, and decided to retire to the country.’

‘So you took over the business?’

‘I had some savings. I hardly used to spend anything. It still took me six years to buy him out.’

‘Where did you meet your wife?’

‘You know Rue Tholozé? It runs off Rue Lepic, just opposite the Moulin de la Galette. It’s a cul-de-sac, with steps at the end. I live just at the bottom of the steps, a small house with a courtyard. It’s handy for ladders and materials.’

He was calming down. His speech was becoming less agitated, more evenly paced.

‘Halfway up the street on the left, there’s a

dance hall called the Bal des Copains where I used to go for an hour or two on Saturday nights.'

'To dance?'

'No, I'd sit in a corner and have a lemonade, because this was before I started to drink. I'd listen to the music and watch the couples on the dance-floor.'

'Any sweethearts?'

He replied awkwardly:

'No.'

'Why not?'

He raised a hand to his lip.

'I'm not good-looking. Women have always scared me a bit. I thought my deformity would disgust them.'

'So anyway, you *did* meet one, called Renée.'

'Yes. The place was full that evening … They put us at the same table. I didn't dare speak to her. And she was as shy as me. You could tell she wasn't used to it.'

'To dance halls?'

'Dance halls, everything, Paris … In the end she spoke first, and I found out she'd only been in the city a month. I asked her where she came from. And she was from

Saint-Sauveur, near Fontenay-le-Comte in the Vendée, which just happens to be my mother's home village. I went there a few times as a child, to see aunts and uncles. So that made things easier. We could say the names of people we both knew.'

'What was Renée doing in Paris?'

'Working as a housemaid for a dairywoman in Rue Lepic.'

'And she was younger than you?'

'I'm thirty-six now and she's twenty-seven. Nearly ten years between us. She was just eighteen at the time.'

'Did you get married very soon?'

'Not until about ten months later. Then we had a child, our little girl, Isabelle. All the time my wife was expecting, I was frightened.'

'What of?'

He pointed again at his lip.

'I'd been told it was hereditary. But, thank God, my daughter is normal. She looks like her mother, except she has my colouring, fair hair and blue eyes.'

'Your wife's dark?'

'Like a lot of folk in the Vendée, because of the Portuguese sailors who used to call in

there, they say.'

'And now you want to kill her?'

'I can't see any other way out. We were happy, the three of us. Perhaps Renée wasn't a perfect housewife. I wouldn't want to speak ill of her. She'd grown up on a farm where they didn't bother overmuch keeping things clean and tidy. In the marshes down there, they call those farms "the cabins", and in winter, they often get flooded.'

'Yes, I know.'

'You've been there?'

'Yes.'

'Sometimes I'd end up cleaning the house when I got in from work. In those days, she was crazy about the cinema, and she'd leave Isabelle with the concierge in the afternoons to go and see a film.'

He said this without bitterness.

'I didn't complain. I mustn't forget she was the first woman to look at me as if I was a normal man. You can understand that, can't you?'

He didn't dare turn to look at the dining room again.

'I'm stopping you eating. What will your wife think?'

‘Go on. For how many years were you happy?’

‘Wait a moment. I never kept track … I don’t even know just when it started. My business was paying well. I spent all the money I made doing up the house, painting, modernizing, I put in a nice kitchen. If you saw it … But you won’t come. Or if you did, it would mean …’

He clasped his hands together again, the fingers covered with ginger hairs.

‘You probably don’t know how the decorating trade works. Some times of year we have plenty of jobs on, other times hardly any. It’s difficult to hold on to the same team of workmen. Apart from old Jules, the one we call Granddad, who was already there under my old boss, I used to hire different workmen almost every year …’

‘Until …?’

‘Until the day Roger Prou turned up. He’s good-looking, he’s strong, smart, knows his way around. At first, I was delighted to have found someone like him, because on site I could trust him absolutely.’

‘And he started to make advances to your wife?’

‘No, honestly, I don’t think so. Women, well, he had as many as he wanted, even customers sometimes. I can’t say, because at the beginning I didn’t notice anything, but I’m pretty sure it was Renée that took the first step. I can understand her a bit. It’s not just that I have this disfigured face, I’m not the kind of man a woman thinks is fun.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing. Just … I’m not very sociable, don’t care much for going out. What I like to do in the evening is stay home, and on Sundays go for a walk with my wife and daughter. For months, I didn’t suspect anything. When we were on a job, Prou would sometimes return to Rue Tholozé to fetch materials. Then one day I went home myself without warning – about two years ago – and found my daughter on her own in the kitchen. I can see her now: she was sitting on the floor. I asked her:

‘ “Where’s Mama?”

‘And she pointed to the bedroom, saying:

‘ “In there!”

‘She was only five. They can’t have heard me coming. I walked in and found them half-naked. Prou was embarrassed. But my wife

just looked me straight in the eye and said:

‘ “Well, now you know!” ’

‘What did you do?’

‘I walked out. I didn’t know where I was going or what I was going to do. I found myself standing at a bar, and I got drunk for the first time in my life. I was thinking about my daughter most of all. I promised myself I’d go and fetch her out of there. I kept telling myself:

‘ “She’s yours. They’ve no right to keep her.”

‘Then, after wandering about half the night, I went home. I was feeling very sick. My wife just watched me with a beady eye, and when I vomited on the rug, she spat:

‘ “You disgust me!”

‘Well, that’s how it all began. The day before that, I’d been a happy man. And all at once …’

‘Where’s Roger Prou now?’

‘In Rue Tholozé,’ Planchon stammered, dropping his eyes.

‘He’s been there for the last two years?’

‘More or less, yes.’

‘He’s living with your wife?’

‘We’re all living there, the three of us.’

He wiped his glasses again, and his eyelids fluttered.

‘Does that seem unbelievable to you?’

‘No.’

‘Do you understand, I just couldn’t bring myself to leave her.’

‘Your wife?’

‘At first, it was for her I was staying. Now I’m not sure, I think it’s simply for my daughter, but perhaps I’m fooling myself. You see, it seemed impossible to me to live without Renée … To be all alone again. And I couldn’t throw her out. It was me that courted her, begged her to marry me. So I was responsible, wasn’t I?’

He sniffed and glanced at the bottle. Maigret poured him a second glass, which he drank in a single gulp.

‘You’ll think I’m a drunkard. And it’s true, I’ve practically become one. In the evenings, they don’t like me being around the house. If they haven’t kicked me out yet, it’s come close. You wouldn’t believe how vicious they are to me.’

‘And Prou came to live in your house from the day you surprised them?’

‘No, not at once. Next day, it was a shock

to see him turn up at work as if nothing had happened. I didn't dare ask him what he meant to do. I was afraid of losing her, like I said. I didn't know what I ought to do. I played it gently. I'm sure they went on seeing each other and, pretty soon, they stopped pretending. It was me that would hesitate at the door, taking care to make a noise, to signal I was coming in.

'Then, one evening, he stayed to supper. It was his birthday, and Renée had made a special effort with the meal. There was a bottle of bubbly on the table. When we got to the dessert, my wife said:

' "Why don't you go for a walk? Can't you see you're in the way?"

'So I went out. I ended up in a bar. I was asking myself questions, trying to find answers, telling myself stories. I wasn't thinking about killing them at that stage, I swear! Tell me you believe me, inspector. Tell me you don't think I'm crazy. Tell me you don't think I'm a disgusting individual, like my wife says.'

Madame Maigret's silhouette was coming and going behind the glass door into the dining room, and Planchon groaned again.

‘I’m stopping you eating. Your wife’s going to be so angry. Why don’t you go and eat?’

It was too late for the television news in any case.

2.

Two or three times, Maigret had been tempted to pinch himself to be sure that the person gesticulating in front of him was real, that the scene was actually taking place, and that they were both living characters.

His visitor appeared to be a very ordinary man, one of the thousands of obscure, hard-working people you meet every day in the Métro, on the bus, or walking along the pavement, making their steady, dignified way towards heaven only knows what tasks and futures. Paradoxically, his hare-lip made him seem less individual, as if that particular infirmity gave all those affected by it the same physiognomy.

For a brief moment, Maigret wondered if Planchon had chosen deliberately, as part of some diabolical scheme, to come and see him in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, instead of being

interviewed in the regular office on Quai des Orfèvres. Or rather, was it intuition that had made him several times flee from the glass-panelled waiting room, with its walls carrying photographs of police officers who had been killed in the line of duty?

At the Police Judiciaire, where he had heard thousands of confessions, where he had prompted so many people to make desperate avowals, Maigret would have viewed his visitor in a rather colder light.

Here he was at home, in his own familiar atmosphere, with the presence nearby of Madame Maigret, the smell of the dinner being prepared, the furniture and ornaments he was accustomed to, the same lamplight falling on the domestic scene as it had done for years and years. The moment he stepped inside his front door, this atmosphere enveloped him, like an old jacket you put on when you come home from work, and he was so used to his surroundings that he still, even after a month, regarded the television set facing the glass door of the dining room as a foreign body.

In this atmosphere, would he be capable of as lucid and detached a mode of questioning

as in his office, during one of those interrogation sessions that could sometimes last all night, leaving him as exhausted as the person in front of him?

For the first time in his career, a man had come to find him after hesitating for weeks, after following him in the street, after writing to him, or so he claimed, and then tearing up the letters, after sitting for hours in the waiting room; a man who did not seem in any way exceptional in his looks or his clothes, yet had contrived to introduce himself into his home, humble yet obstinate, to tell him effectively:

'I intend to kill two people, my wife and her lover. I've prepared everything, right down to the smallest details so as not to get caught.'

And instead of reacting with scepticism, Maigret was listening to him with intense concentration, not missing a single one of his facial expressions. He scarcely felt a twinge of regret for the variety programme he had planned to watch that night on television, sitting alongside his wife – since they were still new to it and everything on the small screen fascinated them.

What was more, he had almost, when the

man pointed towards Madame Maigret coming and going in the dining room, suggested to him:

'Why don't you have a bite to eat with us?'

Because he was hungry, and he sensed this was going to carry on for a long time. He needed to know more, to ask questions and make sure he was not mistaken.

Two or three times, the other man had asked him with desperate anxiety:

'You don't think I'm mad, do you?'

Maigret had, in fact, considered that hypothesis. There are many degrees of insanity, as he knew from experience, and the old woman from the haberdasher's shop, who brought her knitting and sat smiling in the waiting room in case he might need her, was one example.

The man had been drinking before he had arrived. He admitted that he drank every night, and if Maigret had offered him alcohol, it was because he was clearly desperate for it.

Alcoholics go off into a world of their own, one that resembles the real world but with a certain discrepancy, which is not always easy to detect. And they too are sincere.

All these ideas had gone through his head while he was listening, but he was not satisfied with any of them. He wanted to understand better, to penetrate deeper into the frightening universe of Léonard Planchon.

'That's how I began to feel I was a nuisance to them,' the man was saying now, looking straight at him with his light blue eyes. 'I don't know how to explain it. I loved her. I think I still love her. Yes, I'm almost sure I love her, and I'll go on loving her, even if I have to kill her.

'Apart from my mother, she's the only person who has ever taken any interest in me, without being troubled by my face.

'And anyway, she's my wife. Whatever she does, she's still my wife, isn't she? She gave me Isabelle. She carried her in her womb. You can't imagine what I went through when she was pregnant. I would even go down on my knees in front of her, thanking her for … I can't find the words. There was a whole part of my life tied up in *her* life, do you see? And Isabelle is a bit of both our lives …

'Before that, I was lonely. No one cared about me, no one waited for me at home in

the evenings. I went on working without knowing why.

'Well, suddenly she took a lover, and I could hardly feel angry with her. She's young … She's beautiful.

'And him, Roger Prou, he's got a lot more life in him than me. He's like an animal, bursting with health and strength.'

Madame Maigret, by now resigned, had gone back into the kitchen.

Maigret was slowly filling a fresh pipe.

'I told myself all sorts of things. I said it wouldn't last, that she'd come back to me, she'd realize we were bound to each other, whatever she might do … Am I boring you?'

'No, no, carry on.'

'I don't quite know what I'm saying any more. I think it was clearer in my letters. And much less long-winded.

'If I still went to church, like I did when my mother was alive, I'd probably have gone to confession. I can't remember now why I thought of you. At first, I didn't think I'd have the courage to come and find you.

'Now that I'm here, I'm trying to tell you everything at once. I swear to you that if I'm talking so much, it's not because I've been

drinking. I prepared every sentence.

'Where was I?'

He blinked several times, and his hand toyed with a little ashtray he had picked up absent-mindedly from a coffee table.

'The evening of Prou's birthday, they threw you out?'

'Not exactly, because they knew I'd come back. They *sent* me out so that they could spend the evening together.'

'And you still hoped it would just be a brief affair?'

'You probably think I'm naive?'

'So what happened after that?'

He sighed, shaking his head like a man who has lost the thread of his thoughts.

'So many things! A few days after the birthday, when I got in at about two or three in the morning, I found a camp bed in the dining room. I didn't understand at first that it was meant for me. I pushed open the bedroom door and they were both in our bed, asleep or pretending to sleep.

'What could I have done? Roger Prou is stronger than me. And I wasn't very steady on my legs. I think he'd have been quite capable of beating me up.

‘And I didn’t want to wake Isabelle. She still doesn’t understand. In her eyes, I’m still her father.

‘So I slept on the camp bed and by the time they were up next morning I was already in the workshop.

‘My workmen didn’t bother to hide their smiles. Only Jules, the one I told you we call Granddad, his hair’s quite white now, he took a different line. He’d worked for my old boss before I arrived, I think I said, and we’re on familiar terms. He came to find me and muttered:

‘ “Listen, Léonard, it’s time you chucked that woman out. If you don’t do it now, it’ll end in tears.”

‘He realized I didn’t have the courage to do it. He looked me in the eye, put a hand on my shoulder and said:

‘ “I didn’t know you were as sick as this.”

‘I wasn’t sick. I just went on loving her, needing her, her presence, even if she was sleeping with another man.

‘Please, Monsieur Maigret, answer me frankly.’

He didn’t say ‘inspector’, as he would have done at Quai des Orfèvres, but ‘Monsieur

Maigret', seeming to stress that it was the man and not the police chief he had come to see.

'Have you ever met a case like mine before?'

'Are you asking me if there are other men who have stayed with their wife even if they knew she had a lover?'

'Yes, more or less …'

'There are plenty of them.'

'Only I suppose *they're* allowed to keep their place at home, and everyone at least *pretends* that they count for something? Not me. For nearly two years now, they've been gradually pushing me out of my house. They hardly even bother to lay a place for me at table. It's not Prou who's the outsider, it's me. During meals, they just talk to each other or to my daughter, as if I was just a ghost.

'On Sundays, they take the van and go out to the country. At first, I'd stay with Isabelle and I found things to amuse her. If it wasn't for Isabelle, would I have left? I don't know.

'Anyway, these days Isabelle goes with them, because it's more fun to ride in a car.

'I asked myself every question I could

think of, not just at night when I'd had a few drinks, but in the morning and all day while I was at work. Because I still put in my hours at work.

'Questions about my feelings, and also practical questions. I even went to see a lawyer, three months ago. I didn't tell him as much as I've told you, because I got the feeling he was hardly bothering to listen to me, and I didn't interest him.

' "What is it you actually want?" he asked me.

' "I don't know."

' "A divorce?"

' "I don't know. I want to be able to keep my daughter, that's the main thing."

' "Have you proof of your wife's misconduct?"

' "I told you, every night I have to sleep on a camp bed, while they're both in our bedroom."

' "You'd need to get that verified by a senior police officer. What kind of marriage contract do you have?"

'He explained to me that because we didn't have a specific marriage contract stating otherwise, Renée and I were married under

the convention of common assets, which means that my business, the house, the furniture, everything I own, even the clothes I'm wearing, belong to her just as much as to me.

‘ “But what about my daughter?” I asked. “Will they let me have my daughter?”

‘ “That depends. If the misconduct is proved and the judge thinks …” ’

Here Planchon gritted his teeth.

‘He said something else,’ he went on, after a pause. ‘Before I went to see him, like this evening when I've come to see you, I'd had a drink or two to give me courage. And he noticed that right away, I could tell by the way he spoke to me.

‘ “… Well, the judge would have to decide which of you is better able to provide your daughter with a normal upbringing.”

‘And my wife has said the same thing to me, using different words. She's several times said:

‘ “What are you waiting for, why don't you leave? Have you no dignity? Don't you realize you're not wanted here?”

‘But I kept saying to her:

‘ “I won't abandon my daughter.”

‘And *she* said:

‘ “She’s my daughter too, isn’t she? Do you think I’d let her go off with a drunkard like you?”

‘I’m not really a drunkard, Monsieur Maigret, I beg you to believe me, in spite of appearances. Before all this, I didn’t drink at all, not even a little pick-me-up from time to time. But what else was I going to do, out on the street on my own at night?

‘I got in the habit of going into bars and standing at the counter, so as to have people round me, to listen to them talking, to hear human voices.

‘I’d have a drink, then one more. And I’d start thinking and that would drive me to drink another, and another.

‘I’ve tried to stop, and I’ve felt so bad I wanted to throw myself in the Seine. I’ve often thought of doing that. It’s the easiest way out. All that’s holding me back is Isabelle. I just don’t want to leave her with them. The very idea that one day she might call him Papa …’

Now he was weeping and unashamedly took out a handkerchief, while Maigret stared at him.

There was something wrong, certainly. Alcohol or no alcohol, the man was launched, plunging deliberately into his despair.

From the point of view of the police, there was nothing to be done. He had committed no crime. He intended to kill his wife and her lover, at least that was what he claimed. But he had never indicated this intention to them, so he could not be accused of making death threats.

From a legal point of view, the only thing to say was 'Come back here afterwards …'

In other words when he had actually committed the crime! And Maigret could even have added, without fear of being mistaken:

'If you tell the jury your story as you have just told it to me, and if you have a good lawyer, you'd probably get off …'

Was this the solution Planchon had come to wring out of him in some way? For a few seconds, Maigret really suspected that. He disliked men who shed tears. He distrusted men who confessed too readily. And sentimentality boosted by alcohol irritated him.

His dinner was already spoiled, and he had missed his television programme. Planchon showed no sign of being about to leave. He too seemed to appreciate the warm atmosphere in the Maigret apartment. Was he going to be like one of those stray dogs that you pat and comfort when you meet them, and then can never get rid of?

'I'm sorry,' Planchon stammered, wiping his eyes. 'I must seem ridiculous to you. It's the first time in my life I've confided in anyone …'

Maigret wanted to say to him:

'Why me?'

Because the papers had all too often published profiles of him, and reporters had given him the reputation of being a policeman who was humane and understanding.

'How long is it,' he asked, 'since you wrote to me the first time?'

'It was about two months ago, from a little café on the Place du Tertre.'

Maigret's name had been in the papers a great deal round about that time, in connection with a crime committed by an eighteen-year-old youth.

‘And you wrote a dozen or so letters, and tore them all up? In the space of about a week?’

‘Yes, something like that. I’d write two or even three the same evening, and only tear them up next day.’

‘So for six or seven weeks, you came every Saturday to Quai des Orfèvres.’

With his way of presenting himself, then waiting in the glass cage and disappearing before he could talk to anyone, he had become almost as legendary a character as the old lady with her knitting. Was it Janvier or Lucas who had dubbed him ‘the Saturday caller’?

And yet during the whole of that time, Planchon had not put his plan into effect. He had returned every night to Rue Tholozé, lain down on his camp bed, then risen before anyone next morning to go to work, as if nothing was wrong.

But this man was more subtle than one might have thought.

‘I can guess what you’re thinking,’ he said mournfully.

‘What am I thinking?’

‘That I’ve accepted the situation for almost

two years. And for the last two months, I've been thinking of killing my wife, or both of them …'

'And so?'

'Because I haven't done it yet … Admit it! You're telling yourself I never *will* have the courage to do it.'

Maigret shook his head.

'You don't need courage to do that. Murder can be committed by any fool.'

'But when there's no other way out? Put yourself in my place. I had a solid little business, a wife, a child. And I've lost everything. Not just my wife and child, but my living. Because *they* never talk of leaving. The way they see it, *I'm* the one who's unwanted, so I should be the one to leave. That's what I'm trying to explain to you.

'What can I say? It's even been the same with the customers! It happened very gradually. Prou was just one of my workmen, an intelligent and hard-working one, I have to say. He has much more of the gift of the gab than me. So he gets on better with the customers, especially if they're women.

'And without my realizing it, he was gradually stepping into my shoes as the boss,

and when people telephone these days because they want some work done, it's almost always him they ask for. If I was to disappear tomorrow, hardly anyone would notice. Would even my daughter miss me? I'm not so sure. He's a more cheery character than me, he tells her stories, sings songs to her, carries her on his shoulders.'

'What does your daughter call him?'

'She calls him Roger, like my wife does. She's not surprised they sleep in the same room … During the day, the camp bed's folded up and put in a cupboard. It's as if every trace of my presence has been wiped out. But look, I've kept you too long, I must apologize to your wife, she must be getting really annoyed with me …'

But this time, it was Maigret who would not let him go, since he was determined to understand.

'Listen, Monsieur Planchon …'

'I'm listening.'

'For two months you've been setting out to see me, to say, in short:

' "I intend to kill my wife and her lover."

'Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

‘And for two months, you’ve lived every day with that thought.’

‘Yes. There was nothing else …’

‘Wait. I presume you’re not expecting me to say:

‘ “Well, get on with it!” ’

‘You’d have no right to say that.’

‘But you think I must share your point of view.’

A brief gleam in the other man’s eye indicated that he was not far off the mark.

‘So it’s one thing or the other. Forgive me if I sound brutal. Either you don’t really mean to kill anyone at all, it’s just a vague intention, especially after a couple of drinks …’

Planchon nodded sadly.

‘Let me finish. Or else, what I’m saying is that you haven’t really decided, and you want someone to tell you to stop.’

The man came back at him with his eternal refrain:

‘There’s no other way out.’

‘You were hoping *I’d* come up with a solution.’

‘There isn’t one.’

‘All right, let’s imagine that theory is

mistaken. I can see only one other possibility. You genuinely have made plans to kill your wife and her lover. You have even gone so far as to identify the place where you will get rid of their bodies …'

'I've thought of everything.'

'And you come to see me, a man whose job it is to try and catch criminals.'

'I know.'

'What do you know?'

'That it doesn't seem logical.'

From his obstinate expression, it was no less clear that he was clinging to his idea. He had started life without money, without means, or any education to speak of. As far as Maigret could judge, he was only of moderate intelligence.

Having been left alone in Paris after his mother's death, he had nevertheless managed in a few years, by sheer graft and willpower, to become the boss of a quite prosperous small painting and decorating business.

Could it be said that the man wasn't clear-headed? Even if he had started drinking?

'You mentioned the confessional just now. You said that if you were still religious, you'd have gone to a priest.'

‘I think so.’

‘And what do you think the priest would have said?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose he would have tried to stop me carrying out my plan.’

‘What about me?’

‘You would too.’

‘So you want someone to *stop* you, to prevent you from doing something foolish …’

Planchon suddenly appeared lost. A moment earlier, he had been looking at Maigret with confidence, or hope. All at once, it was as if they were no longer speaking the same language and all the words exchanged up till now were of no consequence.

He shook his head and there was reproach in his eyes, disappointment at any rate. He muttered under his breath:

‘It’s not that.’

Perhaps he was on the verge of picking up his hat and leaving, regretting this pointless visit.

‘Wait a moment, Planchon. Try to listen to me, instead of following your own thoughts.’

‘I’m trying, Monsieur Maigret.’

‘What good or comfort would it have

brought you to confess to a priest?'

All in one breath, he replied:

'Oh I don't know.'

He was still there, but he was no longer present. He had begun to retreat into himself, not hearing the inspector's voice, any more than he heard the anonymous voices in the bars where he went drinking.

'You would have gone ahead and killed them after that?'

'I suppose so. I'd better be going.'

And Maigret, feeling almost pained to be disappointing this man, persisted in probing for the grain of truth he felt he had glimpsed somewhere.

'You *don't* want anyone to prevent you doing what you've decided?'

'No.'

Planchon added, with a strange smile:

'The only way would be to put me in jail. But you can't put me in jail if I haven't done anything.'

'So what you're after, what you've come here for, is some kind of absolution. You need to know that you will be understood, that you're not a monster, and that your plan is the only outcome left to you.'

He repeated:

'I don't know.'

And he seemed so distracted that Maigret was tempted to shake him by the shoulder, look him in the eye, and speak loudly to him.

'Listen, Planchon …'

He too was repeating himself. It was perhaps the tenth time he had said those words.

'As you say, I have no right to lock you up. But I could have you watched, even if it doesn't stop you. You'd be arrested immediately. It's not me that would pass sentence on you but the courts, and they *won't* necessarily understand, and will, in all likelihood, concentrate on the idea that the crime was premeditated.

'You've told me you have no family in Paris.'

'Or anywhere else.'

'So what would become of your daughter, even for the months it would take for the case to be investigated and come to court? And after that?'

Yet again, he said:

'I don't know …'

'So?'

‘Nothing.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know. I just don’t know any more, but I’m going to try.’

‘Try what?’

‘To get used to it.’

Maigret wanted to shout at him that that was not what he had meant.

‘What’s stopping you just leaving?’

‘With my daughter?’

‘You’re still the head of the family.’

‘And what about her?’

‘You’re thinking of your wife?’

Shamefacedly, Planchon nodded. Then he added:

‘And there’s my business …’

Which indicated that passion wasn’t the only motive in this case.

‘I’ll see …’

‘Will you come and see me again?’

‘I’ve told you everything. I’ve taken too much of your time already. Your wife …’

‘Don’t worry about my wife, let’s think about you. All right, don’t come back to see me. But I would like us to remain in touch. Don’t forget that it was you who came to find me.’

‘Yes, and I apologize …’

‘You’re going to phone me every day.’

‘Here?’

‘Here or in my office. All I’m asking is that you call me.’

‘Why?’

‘No reason, just to stay in touch. You can just say: “I’m here.” That will do.’

‘Very well, I’ll do that.’

‘Every day?’

‘Every day.’

‘And if, at some stage, you were to feel on the point of putting your plan into operation, you’d call me?’

He hesitated, as if balancing between yes and no.

‘That would mean I wouldn’t do it,’ he said at last.

He was bargaining like a peasant at a fair.

‘Look, if I phoned you to say that—’

‘Answer my question.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘That’s all I ask you. And now you must go home.’

‘Not yet.’

‘Why not?’

‘It isn’t time yet, they’ll both be in the

dining room. What would I do?'

'You're going to hang around in bars all evening?'

He shrugged his shoulders in a resigned way and glanced at the plum brandy bottle. Maigret, although infuriated, ended up pouring him another glass.

'You might as well drink it here as outside.'

The man hesitated, glass in hand, looking ashamed.

'Do you despise me?'

'I don't despise anyone.'

'But if you did?'

'It certainly wouldn't be you.'

'Are you saying that just to keep my spirits up?'

'No, because it's what I think.'

'Well, I thank you, then.'

This time, he had his hat in his hand and was glancing round, as if looking for something else.

'I wish you would explain to your wife …'

Maigret pushed him gently towards the door.

'I've spoiled your evening. And hers.'

He was on the landing now, and already

more anonymous than in Maigret's apartment, a very ordinary little man, such that nobody would turn round in the street if they saw him.

'Goodbye, Monsieur Maigret.'

At last! The door was shut, and Madame Maigret burst out of the kitchen.

'I thought he'd never stop and you'd never manage to get rid of him. I was on the point of coming in to give you an excuse.'

She looked hard at her husband.

'You seem preoccupied.'

'I am.'

'Is he crazy?'

'No, I don't think so.'

She rarely asked him questions. But this was something that had happened at home. As she brought in the soup, she ventured to murmur:

'What did he come here for?'

'To confess.'

She sat down at her place, without blinking.

'You're not putting the television on?'

'The programme will be almost over by now.'

In the past, on Saturday evenings, they

would both go to the cinema, not so much for the film itself as to be out together. Arm in arm, they would head for Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, feeling comfortable with each other; there was no need to say anything.

'Tomorrow,' Maigret now announced, 'we'll go for a walk in Montmartre.'

Arm in arm, like other Sunday strollers. He wanted to see Rue Tholozé again, to look at the house at the far end of the courtyard where Léonard Planchon, his wife, his daughter, Isabelle, and Roger Prou were living.

Had he done the right thing? The wrong thing? Had he found the appropriate words?

Had Planchon found what he was looking for in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir?

By now he would be having a drink somewhere, no doubt going over in his mind everything he had said.

It was impossible to know whether this interview, so long desired and so often postponed, had brought him any peace, or whether on the contrary it was going to trigger some kind of crisis.

It was the first time that Maigret had left a

man standing on the landing in his own house, wondering whether that man would go and kill two people shortly afterwards.

It might happen this very evening, any minute, at the moment perhaps that Maigret was thinking about it.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. I just don't like this business.'

He wondered about telephoning the police station in the eighteenth arrondissement, to ask them to keep a watch on the Planchon house. But you couldn't post a policeman on duty inside the bedroom.

And an officer standing in the street outside would be unable to prevent anything.

3.

It was a Sunday morning like any other, lazy and empty, a little dull. Maigret was in the habit of enjoying a lie-in on a Sunday, if by good fortune he was able to spend it at home. Even if he was not sleepy, he would stay in bed, knowing that his wife would rather not have him ‘under her feet’ before she had finished the housework.

Almost always, he would hear her getting up quietly at about seven, slipping out of bed, and tiptoeing to the door. Then he would hear the click of the light switch in the next room and a strip of light would appear under the door.

He would nod off again, without having woken properly. He knew this always happened and the certainty penetrated his sleep.

It wasn’t the kind of sleep of other days,

but peculiar to Sunday morning, and it had a different texture, a different taste, so to speak. For instance, every half-hour or so he would hear church bells ringing, and he knew how empty the streets were, with no heavy trucks going past and only a few buses.

He knew, too, that he had no responsibilities, and there was nothing urgent to do, no task waiting for him outside.

Later, he would hear the distant whirring of the vacuum cleaner in the other rooms and, later still, the smell of coffee would reach him, something to which he was very alert.

All households surely have traditions they cling to, that lend savour to even the dullest of mornings.

He dreamed about Planchon. It wasn't really a dream. He could see him, just as he was the night before, in their small front room, but his attitude was different. Instead of being troubled by emotion or despair, his features, disfigured by the hare-lip, now appeared to express ironic malice. Although the man did not seem to move his lips, Maigret was aware of what he was saying:

‘Admit it, you think I’m right, there’s nothing else I can do but kill her. You daren’t say so, because you’re employed by the state and you’re afraid of getting into hot water. But you’re not holding me back. You’re waiting for me to have done with her. And with him.’

A hand shook his shoulder gently and a familiar voice said as usual:

‘It’s nine o’clock.’

His wife was handing him his first cup of coffee, which he always drank before getting up.

‘What’s the weather like?’

‘Cold. And windy.’

Already looking fresh and clean in her light blue overall, she drew the curtains. The sky looked white, the air seemed white too, a glacial white.

In his dressing gown and slippers, Maigret went to sit in the dining room, now newly tidied. And the morning would go by, with certain rituals that had been gradually established over the years.

Perhaps it was exactly the same in the apartments he could see on the other side of Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, and indeed all

over Paris, or anywhere else. These little habits, the familiar round, must correspond to a certain human need.

'What are you thinking about?' she asked him.

She had noticed that he seemed pensive and out of sorts.

'That man yesterday.'

Planchon's wife wouldn't be waking him with a cup of hot coffee. When he opened his eyes after the disturbed sleep of a man who has drunk too much, he would find himself on a camp bed in the dining room, and he would be the one who got up first, perhaps hearing regular breathing from the bedroom next door, and guessing at two warm, relaxed bodies in the matrimonial bed.

This image distressed him more than the long monologue he had heard the evening before. Planchon had been referring mainly to weekdays. But what were his Sundays like? His workmen would not be waiting for him in the courtyard or the workshop. He'd have nothing to do, any more than Maigret had. No doubt in that house, it was Renée and her lover who had a long lie-in.

Did Planchon perhaps make coffee for

everyone, setting the table in the kitchen? Did his little daughter, barefoot in her nightdress, her face puffy with sleep, come and join him there?

The man had said that she didn't ask any questions, but there was nothing to stop Isabelle using her eyes and thinking. What did she make of life in that household and of the existence her father was leading?

Maigret ate his croissants while Madame Maigret began preparing lunch. From time to time, they exchanged a few words through the kitchen door. Last night's evening papers, which he had not read, were on the table, along with the weeklies, which he left until Sunday mornings.

His phone call to the Police Judiciaire was another tradition. Perhaps, though, he called a little earlier than usual, with a degree of anxiety.

Torrence was on duty. Maigret recognized his voice and pictured him in the almost deserted offices.

'Nothing to report?'

'Nothing important, chief, except there's been another jewel robbery last night.'

'At the Crillon again?'

‘At the Plaza, Avenue Montaigne.’

And yet he had put officers on duty in all the grand hotels on the Champs-Élysées and the nearby streets.

‘Who was there?’

‘Vacher.’

‘He didn’t see anything?’

‘No. Always the same method.’

They had of course scanned the records of known jewel thieves, including Interpol files. But this burglar’s modus operandi did not correspond to any known specialist, and he seemed to be launching his coups in quick succession, as if, in the space of a few days, he wanted to amass enough money to retire.

‘Did you send someone over to help Vacher?’

‘Dupeu’s gone to meet him. They can’t do much for now. Most of the hotel guests are still asleep.’

Torrence must have found the next question odd.

‘Nothing reported from the eighteenth arrondissement?’

‘Not that I can remember. Hang on, I’ll check the cards. Wait a minute. Bercy … Bercy … I’m just passing over all the Bercys.’

‘Bercy’ was the term used by the police for the more or less disorderly drunks who were regularly brought in to spend a night in the cells.

‘There was a bit of a fight at 3.15 on Place Pigalle. A conman cheated someone … Another swindler, nearby … Knife attack outside a dance hall, Boulevard Rochechouart.’

Just the usual litany of Saturday-night incidents.

‘No murders?’

‘No, can’t see any.’

‘Thanks. A good day to you, then. Call me if there’s anything new from the Plaza.’

And he hung up.

Madame Maigret, standing in the doorway, asked him, as he put the phone down:

‘Is it because of that man that you’re worrying?’

He looked at her without knowing what to say.

‘You think he really will end up killing them?’

Last night, as they went to bed, he had told his wife about Planchon’s confession, but light-heartedly, as if he were not taking

it too seriously.

'You don't think he's wrong in the head?'

'I don't know. I'm not a psychiatrist.'

'Why did he come to find you, then? As soon as I saw him on the landing, I realized this wasn't an ordinary visit, and I admit he frightened me.'

What was the point of worrying? Was it any of his business? Not yet, anyway. He replied evasively and, sitting down in his armchair, was soon deep in the papers.

He had been there hardly ten minutes when he got up again to look for the telephone directory and found the name of Planchon, Léonard, painter and decorator, Rue Tholozé.

So the man had not concealed his identity. Maigret hesitated a moment before dialling the number, finally did so, and, as the telephone rang in that unknown house, he felt a little tug at his heart.

He thought at first there was no one home, since it rang for a long time. Eventually there was a click, and a voice said:

'What is it?'

It was the voice of a woman who did not sound in a very good mood.

‘I wanted a word with Monsieur Planchon.’

‘He’s not here.’

‘Am I speaking to Madame Planchon?’

‘Yes, that’s me.’

‘Do you know how long he will be?’

‘He’s just gone out with his daughter.’

Maigret noticed that she had said ‘his’ daughter not ‘my’ daughter or ‘our’ daughter. He also gathered that someone else was in the room, speaking to the woman and no doubt telling her:

‘Ask him his name.’

And indeed after a brief pause she said:

‘Who’s this speaking?’

‘Just a customer. I’ll call back.’

He hung up. Renée was alive and well. Roger Prou too, evidently, and Planchon had gone for a walk with his daughter, which proved that in Rue Tholozé, like everywhere else, there were Sunday-morning traditions.

He hardly thought about all that for the rest of the morning. Once he had finished the papers, without any great interest, he stayed for a while standing at the window, watching people walking quickly home from mass, hunched forward, their faces blue with cold. Then he took a bath and dressed, as the smell

of cooking spread throughout the apartment.

At midday, they ate their meal facing each other, not the television. They chatted about Doctor Pardon's daughter, who was expecting her second child, then about various other things that did not stay in his memory.

At three o'clock, when the dishes had been washed and everything put away, he suggested:

'Shall we go for a walk?'

Madame Maigret put on her astrakhan coat, and he picked his warmest scarf.

'Where do you want to go?'

'Montmartre.'

'Yes, I remember. You said so yesterday. Shall we take the Métro?'

'It would be warmer there …'

They came out of the Place Blanche Métro station and began walking slowly up Rue Lepic, where the shutters of all the shops were closed.

Where it meets Rue des Abbesses, Rue Lepic makes a long dog-leg. Rue Tholozé by contrast climbs up straight ahead to rejoin it at the Moulin de la Galette.

'Is this where he lives?'

‘Bit higher up. Just by the steps.’

About halfway along, on the left, Maigret noticed a purple-painted façade and a sign which would light up at night: the Bal des Copains. Three young men standing on the pavement outside seemed to be waiting for someone, and from inside came the sound of an accordion. It was too early for anyone to be dancing. The accordionist, at the back of an almost dark room, was just practising.

So it was here that, nine years earlier, the lonely Planchon had met Renée, by chance, because the place was crowded and a harassed waiter had sat a girl at his table.

The Maigrets walked on up the street, a little out of breath from the slope. Between the five- and six-storey buildings, there were still a few smaller houses dating from the time when Montmartre was a village.

They eventually found themselves in front of an open gate leading to a cobbled courtyard. At the far end was a small house, built of characteristic Parisian millstone, the kind you see in the suburbs. It was a two-storey building, old-fashioned and showing its age, with red and yellow bricks round the windows. The woodwork, however, was

freshly painted, a bright blue that clashed with the rest of the façade.

'He lives here?'

They dared not linger, contenting themselves with seeing as much as they could by walking slowly past. Madame Maigret later remembered that the curtains at the windows were very clean. Maigret himself noted the ladders in the courtyard, a handcart and a wooden shed with large cans of paint visible through the windows.

The van was not in the courtyard. There was no garage. The curtains did not move. No sign of life was visible. Should they conclude that Planchon, his wife, Isabelle and Prou had all gone out together in the van?

'What shall we do now?'

Maigret didn't know. He had wanted to see, and now that he had seen, he had no further plans.

'Well, since we're here, shall we go up to Place du Tertre?'

They drank a small carafe of rosé wine and a long-haired artist offered to draw their portraits.

By six p.m. they were back home. He

telephoned Quai des Orfèvres. Dupeu was there. He was no further forward with the theft at the Plaza, where some guests, having been out all night, had not yet ordered their breakfast.

This time Maigret did not miss his television programme, although it was a police drama that made him grumble out loud all evening.

At heart, although he appreciated the monotony of Sundays, he liked even better the moment on Monday morning when he took possession once more of his office. He went to the daily briefing, and shook hands with his colleagues. Each of them reported back on current cases, at greater or lesser length, and he preferred to keep quiet about the visit he had received on Saturday evening. Was he afraid of looking ridiculous if he attached too much importance to it?

Monday was the only day of the week when they all shook hands. He found Lucas, Janvier, young Lapointe and the others there, and all of them, unless they happened to be on weekend duty, would, like him, have spent Sunday at home with their families.

He chose in the end to call in Lapointe and

Janvier to his office.

'Have you kept the cards we had made for the Rémond case?'

It went back a few months, to the early autumn. They had needed to find some evidence against a certain Rémond, who went by several identities and was suspected of having committed crimes in most of the countries of Europe. He lived in furnished lodgings in Rue de Ponthieu and, in order to gain admission while he was away without raising the landlady's suspicions, Janvier and Lapointe had turned up one morning with official-looking cards from some vague office for re-evaluating the surface area of the building.

'We have to measure all the rooms and the corridor,' they had announced.

They had briefcases stuffed with papers under their arms, and young Lapointe, looking conscientious, had taken notes, while Janvier brought out his tape measure.

This wasn't very legal. But it was not the first time the trick had been used and it could be tried again.

'You're to go to Rue Tholozé. Up at the end on the right, there's a small dwelling-house

at the far end of a courtyard.'

Maigret would have dearly liked to go there himself, and sniff round the corners of the house, about which he wanted to know everything.

He gave detailed instructions and, once his colleagues had left, turned to current matters.

The sky was still pale and unyielding, the Seine a vicious grey. It was almost midday when Janvier and Lapointe returned, and he took the time to sign a few administrative papers and ring for Joseph to collect them.

'Well, boys?'

Janvier spoke first.

'We rang the bell.'

'Yes, I imagine you did. Was it the wife who came to the door? What's she like?'

They looked at each other.

'Dark-haired, quite tall, good figure …'

'Attractive woman?'

This time, Lapointe broke in:

'Gergeous female, if you ask me.'

'What was she wearing?'

'Red dressing gown, slippers, hadn't done her hair. Yellow nightdress underneath.'

'Did you see the daughter?'

‘No, she must have been in school.’

‘Was the van in the courtyard?’

‘No, and there wasn’t anyone in the workshop.’

‘How did she receive you?’

‘She seemed wary. She peered at us first, through the curtains. Then we heard footsteps in the corridor. She opened the door just a crack, only showing half her face, and said:

‘ “What is it? I don’t need anything.”

‘We explained what it was.’

‘Did she seem taken aback?’

‘She asked:

‘ “Are you doing this to all the houses in the street?”

‘And when we said yes, she decided to let us in.

‘ “Will it take long?”

‘ “Half an hour at most.”

‘ “Do you really have to measure the whole house?” ’

Next, the two inspectors gave their impressions. What had struck them most was the kitchen.

‘It was a magnificent kitchen, chief, very light and modern, all the latest gadgets. You

wouldn't expect to find a kitchen like that in an old house. They've even got a dishwasher.'

Maigret was not surprised. It seemed in character for Planchon to have given his wife every possible luxury.

'Well, the house looks nice inside. You can see at once it belongs to a painter, everything's newly decorated. In the little girl's room, the furniture's all been painted pink.'

This too corresponded to the character of the Saturday caller.

'Go on.'

'Next to the kitchen, there's quite a big living room they use as a dining room, and it has rustic-type furniture.'

'Did you find the camp bed?'

'Yes, it was in a cupboard.'

Janvier added:

'I said casually to her:

' "That's handy, isn't it, if you have friends to stay?" '

'And she didn't react?'

'No. But she followed us everywhere, watching everything we did, not too sure we'd really come from an official agency. She

asked at one point:

‘ “What’s the purpose of all these measurements you’re taking?”

‘I trotted out our formula: from time to time, because people alter their houses, we need to review the basis for the local land tax, and as long as they hadn’t extended their place, they had nothing to worry about.

‘I don’t think she’s all that bright, but she’s not the sort of woman who’d let herself be taken advantage of either, and I was thinking a moment would come when she’d pick up the phone to call our supposed agency. Because of that, we hurried up. Two more rooms on the ground floor: a bedroom and a little room that seems to be an office, where the telephone is.

‘The bedroom, nicely painted too, hadn’t been tidied, there was stuff everywhere. The office was the kind of cubby-hole small businesses all have: filing cabinets, bills on a spike, a stove in the fireplace, and samples piled on the mantelpiece. The bathroom’s not downstairs, but on the first floor, next to the daughter’s room.’

‘That’s all?’

Lapointe broke in:

‘The telephone rang while we were there. She made the caller repeat the name twice, wrote it on a pad and said:

‘ “No, he’s not here at the moment. He’s out on a job. What? … Monsieur Prou, yes. I’ll pass on the message and he’ll be over to see you, probably this afternoon.”

‘Now, chief, if the size of the rooms interests you …’

They’d done what they were asked. Although Maigret was not much further forward than before, now at least he had a clearer idea of the house, and it was exactly as he had imagined it.

Did the two men, the husband and the lover, work on the same site or, on the contrary, did they choose to take on different jobs? Surely they were obliged by their work to speak to one another? If so, what tone did they use?

Maigret returned home for lunch and asked if there had been any phone calls. No, there had not, and it was a little after six p.m. when he received in his office the call he had been waiting for.

‘Hello! Monsieur Maigret?’

‘Yes, it’s me.’

‘Planchon here.’

‘Where are you?’

‘In a café in Rue des Abbesses, just next to a house I’ve been working on all day. You see, I’ve kept my word. You asked me to phone you.’

‘How are you feeling?’

There was a silence.

‘Are you feeling calm?’

‘I’m always calm. I’ve been thinking a lot.’

‘Did you take your daughter out for a walk yesterday morning?’

‘How did you know? Yes, I took her to the flea market.’

‘What about the afternoon?’

‘They took the van.’

‘All three of them?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you stayed home?’

‘I went to sleep.’

So he had been in the house when Maigret and his wife had walked past it.

‘I’ve thought a lot.’

‘What conclusion have you come to?’

‘I don’t know. No conclusion. I’m going to try and hang on as long as possible. When it comes to it, I’m wondering if I really want

things to change. And anyway, as you said the other day, I'd be in danger of losing Isabelle.'

Maigret could hear the clink of glasses, the murmur of voices and the sound of a cash register.

'Will you call me tomorrow?'

The man at the other end hesitated.

'Do you think there's any point?'

'I'd prefer it if you called me every day.'

'You don't trust me?'

What could he say to that question?

'I'll survive, don't you worry.'

He laughed a little bitterly.

'I've survived two years. I'm enough of a coward to carry on the same way. Because I am a coward, aren't I? Admit it, that's what you think. Instead of acting like a real man would've done, I come whimpering to you.'

'You were quite right to come, and you didn't whimper.'

'You don't despise me?'

'No.'

'Did you tell your wife everything the minute I was out of the door?'

'No.'

'She didn't ask you who was the annoying

person who had spoiled your dinner?'

'You ask yourself too many questions, Monsieur Planchon. You're too self-conscious.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Go home.'

'To my house?'

Maigret did not know what to say to that. He could not remember feeling so embarrassed in his life.

'Well, for goodness' sake, it *is* your house, isn't it? If you don't want to do that, go somewhere else. Just don't go trailing from bar to bar, because you'll only get yourself more distressed.'

'I get the feeling you're angry with me.'

'No, I'm not *angry*. I'd just like you to stop mulling over the same ideas.'

Maigret did feel some irritation, but with himself. He was perhaps wrong to be talking like this. It's difficult, especially over the telephone, to find the right words to say to a man who is thinking of killing his wife and his foreman.

The situation was absurd, and it was as if Planchon had sensitive antennae as well. Although Maigret wasn't really angry, he was

certainly annoyed with this man for troubling him with a story he wouldn't have dared tell his colleagues in case they thought him naive.

'Keep calm, Monsieur Planchon.'

He could only think of those empty phrases used for condolences.

'Don't forget to call me tomorrow. And tell yourself that what you have in mind wouldn't solve anything. On the contrary.'

'Well, thank you, anyway …'

His heart wasn't in it. Planchon was disappointed. He'd just finished work, and no doubt hadn't yet drunk enough alcohol for a different mood to take over, letting him see things the way he had on Saturday evening.

When he was sober, he must be without illusions. What kind of image did he have of himself, and the ridiculous or odious figure he cut in a house that belonged to him?

That last 'Well, thank you, anyway' had sounded bitter and Maigret would have preferred to carry on talking, but the other man had hung up. There was another solution, which Planchon had hardly mentioned on Saturday, and which suddenly made the inspector anxious.

Now that Planchon had articulated his troubles by telling them to someone, now that he could have no illusions about himself, wouldn't he be tempted to end it all by killing himself?

If Maigret had known where he was phoning from, he would have called him back at once. But what could he say?

Damn it all! It wasn't really anything to do with him. He wasn't obliged to intervene. It wasn't his job to put people's lives right, he was supposed to find those who had committed a crime.

He went on working for an hour, in a bad mood, on the jewel thefts, which would probably take weeks to solve. It seemed clear that on each occasion, the thief had been a guest at the hotel from which the jewels had disappeared. The thefts had taken place in four different hotels, at two or three days' interval.

That being so, it should have been easy enough to study the lists of guests and catch the person or persons who turned up on the different lists. But that didn't work. And the descriptions provided by the reception staff were no assistance either.

Weeks? It would probably take months, and it was quite likely that the dénouement would take him to London, Cannes or Rome, unless the jewels could be traced through some known fence in Antwerp or Amsterdam.

Still, this was less depressing than worrying about Planchon. Maigret took a taxi home, since it was late. He ate his dinner, watched television, went to bed, and was woken as usual by the smell of coffee.

In the office, he growled:

'Get me the station in the eighteenth. Hello, is that the eighteenth? … That you, Bernard? Nothing on your patch last night? … No? No murders? No one gone missing? … Listen. I'd like someone to keep a discreet eye on a house at the top end of Rue Tholozé, just by the steps. Yes … No, not twenty-four hours a day, of course. Just at night. If the man on patrol could glance in, check for instance that the house-painter's van is in the courtyard … Thanks. If by any chance the van's *not* there at night, can you call me? … No, nothing precise. Just a hunch. You know how it is. Thank you.'

Another routine day, people to question,

not just about the jewels but in connection with two or three other less important cases.

From six o'clock, he was waiting for the telephone to ring. It rang twice, but it wasn't Planchon either time. By six thirty, he had still not called, nor at seven, and Maigret felt angry with himself for being on edge.

Nothing dramatic could have happened during the day. It was highly unlikely for instance that, while his child was at school, Planchon would have come home to kill his wife, then waited for Prou to return before killing him too. In fact, Maigret realized he had not asked him how he proposed to do the deed. Had the painter not declared that he had prepared his plan for a double murder down to the smallest detail?

He surely did not possess a revolver and, even if he did, it was unlikely he'd use it. Men like him, with a manual trade, mostly prefer to use one of their usual tools.

But what tool would a painter and decorator have? He could not help laughing to himself, as he thought of a paintbrush.

At a quarter past seven, there had still been no call, so he went home. The telephone did not ring there, either during

dinner or in the course of the evening.

'You're still thinking about him?' asked his wife.

'Not all the time, of course, but it's bothering me.'

'You once told me that people who talked a lot didn't generally take action.'

'No, as a rule they don't. But it does happen.'

'Have you caught cold?'

'Perhaps from walking round Montmartre on Sunday. Does my voice sound hoarse?'

She went to find him an aspirin and he slept soundly all night, waking to find rain beating on the windows. He waited until ten next morning before calling the eighteenth.

'Bernard?'

'Yes, chief.'

'Nothing in Rue Tholozé?'

'No, the van didn't leave the yard.'

It was only at seven that night, having heard nothing further, that he decided to telephone the house in Rue Tholozé, where a man's voice he did not recognize replied.

'Planchon? Yes, that's right. But he's not here. He won't be back this evening either.'

4.

Maigret had the impression that the man at the other end had tried to hang up on him abruptly, but that at the last moment he had hesitated, as if suspicious. The inspector hastened to ask:

‘Is Madame Planchon there?’

‘She’s out.’

‘And she won’t be in tonight either?’

‘She should be back any minute. She just went to do a bit of shopping round the corner.’

Another silence, and the line was so good that Maigret could hear Prou breathing.

‘What do you want with him? Who are you?’

He was on the point of pretending to be a customer, saying anything that came to mind. After a pause, he preferred to ring off.

He had never seen the man he was

speaking to. The little he knew of him had come from Planchon, who had good reason to be biased.

Yet, immediately, as soon as he had heard his voice, Maigret had felt antipathy for Renée's lover, and was annoyed with himself on that account. It was not because of the husband's story that the feeling came. It was the voice itself, the aggressive drawl. He would have sworn that Prou, at the other end, was staring at the telephone with suspicion, and that he never replied directly to questions.

This was a kind of man he knew well, men who don't let anyone get the better of them, who look you up and down with a beady eye and, at the first awkward question, frown with their bristling eyebrows.

Did he really have bristling eyebrows? And did his hair grow down low on his forehead?

Bad-temperedly, Maigret sorted out his papers, and followed his usual routine by calling Joseph.

'Nobody else for me?'

Then he put his head round the door of the inspectors' office.

'If anyone wants me, I'm at home.'

On the embankment, he opened his umbrella. Standing on the deck of the bus, he found himself crammed against someone with a streaming wet raincoat.

Before sitting down to dinner, he called Rue Tholozé again. He was feeling unhappy about everything and everyone. He felt aggrieved at Planchon, who had come to him with his pathetic and ridiculous story, he felt aggrieved at Roger Prou, heaven knew why, and he felt angry with himself. He almost felt annoyed with his wife, who was looking at him anxiously.

Was it their normal practice in that house not to pick the phone up at first? It sounded as if it was ringing in an empty space. Then he remembered that the telephone was in the little office. No doubt they would be eating their meal in the kitchen, so they would have some distance to come.

At last, someone. A woman.

'Madame Planchon?'

'Yes. Who is that?'

She was speaking naturally, in a low-pitched and not unattractive voice.

'I wanted a word with Léonard.'

'He's not here.'

‘You don’t know when he’ll be back? I’m a friend of his.’

This time, as with Prou, there was a silence. Was Roger Prou alongside her and were they exchanging questioning glances?

‘What friend?’

‘Never mind, you don’t know me. I was supposed to meet him this evening.’

‘He’s gone away.’

‘For long?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you tell me when he’ll be back?’

‘No, I don’t know.’

‘Is he in Paris?’

Another pause.

‘If he is, he didn’t leave an address. Does he owe you money?’

Maigret hung up once more. And Madame Maigret, who had overheard him, asked as she served the soup:

‘Has he disappeared?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘You think he might have committed suicide?’

He muttered:

‘I don’t think anything.’

He saw the man again, sitting in their front

room, his knuckles white from clasping his fingers together; he saw above all his pale blue eyes staring at him beseechingly.

Planchon, after several drinks, had been under pressure. He had talked a lot. Maigret had allowed himself to go along with that, and there were a number of precise questions he ought to have asked, and had not.

After dinner, he phoned the emergency services. It was the time when duty officers would be eating, watching their switchboards, and the man who replied had his mouth full.

'No, chief. No suicides reported since I got in … Wait while I check the daytime log. One moment … Old woman threw herself out of a window in Boulevard Barbès. Corpse pulled from the Seine at the bridge at Saint-Cloud at five p.m. Condition suggests it's been in the water about ten days. Can't see anything else.'

It was Wednesday evening. Next day, in his office, Maigret began scribbling on a piece of paper.

It had been on the Saturday evening that he had found Planchon waiting for him at home on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.

On Sunday morning, he had telephoned the house in Rue Tholozé and Madame Planchon had told him that her husband was out with his daughter.

That was true, because the painter had confirmed it to him later. Isabelle and her father had gone off hand in hand to the flea market in Saint-Ouen.

On the same Sunday afternoon, Maigret and his wife had walked past the entrance to the house. The van had not been in the yard. No one could be seen behind the curtains, but he had later learned, again from Planchon, that he was at home, asleep.

On Monday morning, Janvier and Lapointe, using methods bordering on the illegal, had gone to Rue Tholozé, where under Renée's suspicious gaze they had looked in every room, pretending to take measurements.

In the late afternoon, Léonard Planchon had telephoned him at Quai des Orfèvres from a café on Place des Abbesses, or so he said, and Maigret had certainly overheard voices, glasses clinking and the sound of a till.

The man's last words had been: 'Well,

thank you, anyway …’

He hadn’t mentioned taking a trip, nor given any hint at all of suicide. It was on the Saturday that he had vaguely mentioned that solution, which he was rejecting, so as not to leave Isabelle in the care of Renée and her lover.

On the Tuesday, no phone call. In order to put his mind at rest, Maigret had asked the police in the eighteenth arrondissement to take a look at the house in Rue Tholozé during the night. Not constant surveillance. The officers doing their rounds would just have glanced in to see that nothing unusual was happening and that the van was still in the yard. Which it was.

Wednesday finally. Nothing. No call from Planchon. And when Maigret had phoned the house at about seven p.m., Roger Prou had said that Planchon would not be back that evening. He seemed vague, as if wary. Renée was not home then either.

But as her lover had said, she was there an hour later, and from her replies he had deduced that she did not expect to see her husband again for quite some time.

He attended the daily briefing, as he did

every morning, still avoiding any mention of the case, which did not exist officially. A little after ten, in the freezing cold drizzle, he left the Police Judiciaire and took a taxi to Rue Tholozé.

He did not yet know how he would handle this. He had no precise plan.

'Shall I wait?' the taxi-driver said.

He preferred to pay, since he might be there for a while.

The van was not in the yard, but a workman in white overalls stained with paint was coming and going in the shed. Maigret went straight to the dwelling-house and pressed the bell. A window opened on the first floor above his head, and he did not budge. Then he heard footsteps on the stairs and the door opened a little way, as it had for Janvier and Lapointe, and he glimpsed black tousled hair, one eye almost as dark, a face with very pale skin, and the red fabric of a dressing gown.

'What is it?'

'I would like a word with you, Madame Planchon.'

'What about?'

The door remained open fifteen

centimetres at most.

'About your husband.'

'He's not here.'

'It's precisely because I need to see him that I would like to speak to you.'

'What do you want with him?'

He decided at last to reveal himself.

'Police.'

'Do you have a card?'

He showed her his badge. Changing her attitude, she opened the door wider and stood back to let him go past.

'I'm sorry. I'm alone in the house and there've been some mysterious phone calls lately.'

She was looking hard at him, perhaps wondering if he had been the caller.

'Come in. The house is still in a mess.'

She took him into the living room where a vacuum cleaner was standing in the middle of the carpet.

'What has my husband done?'

'I need to get in touch with him to ask him a few questions.'

'Has he been in a fight?'

She indicated a chair to him, but was hesitating to sit down herself, pulling the

dressing gown more tightly around her.

'Why do you ask that?'

'Because he spends the evening and half the night in bars, and when he's had a few, he gets violent.'

'Has he ever hit you?'

'No. Well, I wouldn't have stood for it. But he has threatened me.'

'What kind of threat?'

'To bump me off. He didn't go into detail.'

'And has that happened several times?'

'Several times, yes.'

'And do you know where he is just now?'

'I don't know, and I don't care.'

'When did you last see him?'

She took time to think.

'Wait a minute, it's Thursday. Wednesday yesterday, Tuesday the day before. It was Monday evening.'

'At what time?'

'Late at night.'

'You don't remember the exact time?'

'It must have been about midnight.'

'You'd gone to bed?'

'Yes.'

'Alone?'

'No. No reason I need to lie to you.

Everyone round here knows how it is, and I should say they're all on our side, Roger's and mine. If it wasn't for my husband being so obstinate, we'd have got married long ago.'

'You mean you have a lover?'

Not without a certain pride, she answered, looking him straight in the eye.

'Yes.'

'And he lives here in this house?'

'Why not? When a man like Planchon clings on, and refuses a divorce, you have to …'

'Since when?'

'Nearly two years now.'

'And your husband has accepted the situation?'

'He's been my husband in name only for a good while now. And it's a long time since he was a real man either. I don't know what you want with him. What he does when he's out of the house is no business of mine. What I *can* tell you, and no one will tell you any different, is that he's a drunk, and you can't expect anything from him any more. If it wasn't for Roger, the business would have collapsed.'

‘Can I take you back to Monday evening? You were in bed, in the bedroom.’

Its door was open, and an orange eiderdown was visible on the bed.

‘Yes.’

‘With this man called Roger.’

‘Roger Prou’s his name, a good sort who doesn’t drink and who’s prepared to put his back into his work.’

She spoke of him with pride and Maigret sensed that she would have flown at anyone who dared disparage him.

‘Did your husband eat with you that night?’

‘No, he hadn’t come home.’

‘Did that happen often?’

‘Quite often. I’m beginning to know what alcoholics are like. For a while, they can keep up a bit of a show, some dignity. But they end up drinking so much they’re not hungry, and instead of eating, they have a few more drinks.’

‘And your husband had reached that stage?’

‘Yes.’

‘But he carried on working, didn’t he? Wasn’t there a danger he might hurt himself

falling off a ladder or scaffolding?'

'He didn't drink, well not much, during the day. As for his work, if the whole business had depended on him …'

'You have a daughter, I believe.'

'How do you know? Oh, I suppose you asked the concierge. Well, it doesn't bother me, we've nothing to hide. Yes, I've got a daughter. She's nearly seven.'

'So on Monday evening, you ate supper together, Roger Prou, yourself and your daughter …'

'Yes.'

'In this room?'

'In the kitchen. I don't see what difference that makes. We usually eat in the kitchen. Not a crime, is it?'

She was getting impatient, puzzled by the turn the questions were taking.

'And I presume your daughter would go to bed first?'

'Of course.'

'Upstairs?'

She was clearly surprised to find him so well informed. Had she already made the connection between his visit and that of the two men who came to measure the rooms?

At all events she did not become flustered, but continued to look straight at her visitor, not averting her gaze, then suddenly it was she who asked a question.

'Wait a minute, aren't you the famous Detective Chief Inspector Maigret?'

He nodded and she frowned. If an ordinary policeman, a local inspector for instance, had come round to ask about her husband's doings, that would not be so remarkable, given the life Planchon led in the evenings. But that Maigret in person should trouble to come …

'So it must be something important.'

And with a certain irony, she said:

'You're not going to tell me he's killed someone?'

'Do you think he's capable of it?'

'He's capable of anything in my view. When a man reaches that point …'

'Was he armed?'

'I've never seen a gun in the house.'

'Did he have any enemies?'

'To the best of my knowledge, his real enemy was me. In his mind, anyway. He hated me. It was out of hate, pure hate, that he insisted on staying here, in conditions no

man would ever accept. If only for his daughter's sake, he should have realized …'

'Let's get back to Monday. When did you go to bed, you and Roger Prou?'

'Let me think. I went to bed first.'

'What time was that?'

'About ten. Roger stayed up doing the invoices in the office.'

'So he's been taking care of the paperwork and the accounts?'

'In the first place if he hadn't, no one would have, because my husband wasn't capable of doing it any more. And secondly, Roger has put enough of his own money into the business …'

'You mean they were partners, he and Planchon?'

'Practically. There wasn't anything down on paper. Or rather yes, they did sign something, only about a fortnight ago.'

She interrupted herself to go into the kitchen where something was boiling over on the stove, but came straight back.

'What else do you want to know? I've got to finish the housework and get the lunch. My daughter will be back from school presently.'

‘I’m sorry. I need to keep you a little longer.’

‘You still haven’t told me what my husband’s done.’

‘I’m hoping your answers might help me to find him. Do I understand correctly? Your lover has put his own money into the business?’

‘Every time there wasn’t enough to pay the bills.’

‘And then a fortnight ago, they signed a paper. What sort of paper?’

‘One saying that in exchange for a certain sum of money, Roger would take over the business.’

‘And do you know how much money that was?’

‘I typed the document myself.’

‘You can type?’

‘After a fashion. There’s this old typewriter in the office, it’s been there for years. Planchon bought it before I got pregnant, soon after we got married. I was bored and wanted something to do … So I started typing invoices, just with two fingers, and then I did the letters to customers or suppliers …’

‘And you still do that?’

‘When it’s needed.’

‘Do you have the document here?’

She looked at him more sharply.

‘I’m wondering if you’ve got the right to ask me all these questions. I wonder if I’m obliged to answer them.’

‘For the moment, no, you are under no obligation.’

‘For the moment?’

‘Well, I could summon you to attend my office, as a witness.’

‘A witness to what?’

‘Let’s say your husband’s disappearance.’

‘But he hasn’t disappeared.’

‘Well, what would you call it?’

‘He just left, that’s all. And it was high time he did.’

She stood up, nevertheless.

‘I don’t see why I need to hide anything from you. If this document interests you, I’ll go and fetch it.’

She went to the office and could be heard opening a drawer. She returned a few moments later, holding a sheet of paper. It carried a letterhead in the name of Léonard Planchon, painter and decorator. The text

had been typed with a violet ribbon and rather irregularly – some letters were on top of one another and two or three spaces between the words were missing.

> *I, the undersigned, Léonard Planchon, grant to Roger Prou, in exchange for the sum of 30,000 (thirty thousand) new francs, my share in the painting business located Rue Tholozé, in Paris, which I own equally with my wife, Renée, née Babaud.*
>
> *This transfer includes the lease of the building, all the equipment and furniture, excluding my personal possessions.*

The document was dated 28 December.

'Normally,' Maigret objected, looking up, 'this kind of agreement would be signed in front of a solicitor. Why didn't you do that?'

'To save money. What would be the point? When people are in good faith.'

'So your husband signed it in good faith?'

'Well, *we* did, at any rate.'

'This paper is dated three weeks ago. So Planchon no longer had any part in the business after that. I'm wondering why he went on working for it.'

'And why he went on living in this house, although he had been nothing to me for even longer.'

‘So he was carrying on, just as a workman?’

‘You could say that.’

‘And being paid?’

‘I suppose so. You’d have to ask Roger.’

‘And the three million old francs were paid by cheque?’

‘No, in cash.’

‘Here?’

‘Well, not in the street!’

‘In front of witnesses?’

‘We were all three present. Our personal affairs don’t concern anyone else.’

‘And no condition was attached to this agreement?’

This idea seemed to strike her and she stayed silent for a moment.

‘There was one, but he didn’t keep it.’

‘What was that?’

‘That he’d go away and finally let me have a divorce.’

‘Well, he has gone away …’

‘After three weeks!’

‘Let’s get back to Monday.’

‘What, again? Is this going to take long?’

‘I hope not … So you were in bed, Prou came to join you. Were you awake when he

came in?'

'Yes.'

'Did you notice the time?'

'If you really want to know, we had other things to do.'

'So you were both asleep by the time your husband came home.'

'No.'

'He opened the door with his own key?'

'Well, he didn't use a biro.'

'I just thought he might be too drunk to manage it himself.'

'Yes, he was drunk, but he could get the key in the lock all right.'

'Where did he sleep as a rule?'

'Here. On a camp bed.'

She stood up again, opened a cupboard and pointed to a camp bed, folded up.

'This was already put up for him?'

'Yes, I would do it myself before I went to bed, so he wouldn't be making a racket for half an hour.'

'But on Monday evening he didn't sleep in it?'

'No. We heard him go upstairs.'

'To kiss his daughter goodnight perhaps?'

'No, he never went to kiss his daughter

when he was in that state.'

'So what was he doing?'

'That's what we wondered. We listened. He opened a cupboard on the landing where he keeps his things. Then he went into the little boxroom where we store stuff, because there's no attic. Then there was a clattering noise on the stairs, and I had to hold Roger back, because he wanted to go and see what was happening.'

'And what was happening?'

'He was carrying down his suitcases.'

'How many?'

'Two. There were only two in the house, because we hardly ever went away.'

'And you didn't talk to him? You didn't see him leave?'

'Yes, I did. When he came down and back into the dining room I got up, but I made Roger stay where he was, to avoid a scene.'

'And you weren't afraid? You told me that when your husband had been drinking he was violent, and he *had* threatened you …'

'Well, Roger was within earshot.'

'So what happened the last time you spoke to him?'

'Already, through the door, I'd heard him

talking to himself and he seemed to be laughing. When I went in, he just looked me up and down and laughed again.'

'Was he very drunk?'

'He wasn't drunk in the usual way. He didn't threaten me. He didn't start acting up, and he wasn't crying. Do you see what I mean? He seemed pleased with himself, and you'd have thought he was going to play a good trick on us.'

'He didn't say anything?'

'Well, first he said:

' "Now then, old lady!" and he showed me the two cases.'

Just as she did not take her eyes off Maigret, he too was attentive to the slightest quiver of her face. She must have realized that, but it did not appear to trouble her.

'And that was all?'

'No. He muttered something along the lines of:

' "Go on, search them if you want, to see I'm not taking anything of yours."

'He was stumbling over the words, and talking to himself more than to me.'

'And you say he looked pleased with himself?'

‘Yes, like I said. It was as if he was going to play some kind of trick on us. I asked him:

‘ “Where are you going?”

‘And he waved his arm around and almost fell over.

‘ “Have you got a taxi waiting?”

‘He just looked at me and laughed again, without answering me. He’d picked up his cases, and I pulled his coat-sleeve.

‘I said:

‘ “That’s all very well, but I’ll need your address to get started on the divorce.” ’

‘What did he say to that?’

‘I remember exactly what he said, because I repeated it afterwards to Roger:

‘ “Oh, you’ll have it, my beauty. And sooner than you think!” ’

‘He didn’t mention his daughter?’

‘No, he didn’t say anything else.’

‘He didn’t go up to kiss her goodbye?’

‘We’d have heard him if he had, because Isabelle’s room is directly over our heads and the floorboards creak.’

‘So he went off with his two cases. Did they look heavy?’

‘I didn’t pick them up. A bit heavy perhaps, but not very, because he would only

have taken his clothes, his underwear, his shaving things, and so on.'

'And did you go to the door with him?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because it would have seemed like I was seeing him out.'

'You didn't watch him cross the courtyard?'

'The shutters were closed. All I did was wait a bit and then bolt the front door.'

'You weren't afraid he'd take the van?'

'I'd have heard the engine if he had.'

'So you didn't hear any vehicle? There wasn't a taxi outside on the street?'

'I've no idea. I was only too glad to see him leave the house at last. I ran back into the bedroom, and if you want to know, I rushed into Roger's arms. He'd got up and heard everything through the door.'

'And all this was Monday evening?'

'Monday, that's right.'

It was only on the Tuesday that Maigret had asked his colleagues in the eighteenth to keep a discreet eye on the house. If Renée Planchon was to be believed, it was already too late by then.

‘And you’ve no idea where he could be?’

Maigret could still hear Planchon’s last words to him over the phone that same Monday at about six o’clock, when he had been in a café on Place des Abbesses.

‘Well, thank you, anyway.’

It had seemed to him at the time that there was something in the man’s voice, a certain bitterness or even irony. He had felt so sure of it that he would have called him back if that had been possible.

‘Your husband hasn’t got any relatives in Paris?’

‘No, or anywhere else either. I know that for a fact, because his mother was from the same village as me, Saint-Sauveur in the Vendée.’

She couldn’t have known that Planchon had been to see Maigret and taken him into his confidence. Everything she said corresponded to what he already knew.

‘Do you think he might have gone back there?’

‘What for? He hardly knew it, he’d just been there a few times with his mother when he was a child, and if there was any family left, it’d be some vague cousins that have

never been in touch.'

'And you don't know of any friends he might have?'

'When he was a more normal man, he was shy and timid, so I still wonder how he ever found the courage to speak to me.'

Maigret tried a little test:

'Where did you meet?'

'Just down the street, in the Bal des Copains. It was the first time I'd set foot there. I'd just arrived in Paris and I worked nearby. I should have been more suspicious.'

'What of?'

'Of a man with an infirmity.'

'What would that have to do with his character?'

'I don't know. But yes, I do have this feeling that people like that think about it all the time; they feel different from other people. They get it in their heads everyone's staring at them, and making fun of them. So it makes them more touchy, they're jealous, bitter …'

'Was he already bitter when you married him?'

'I don't remember. But he didn't want to see people, we hardly ever went out. We

lived in here like prisoners. He liked it that way. *He* was quite happy.'

She paused and looked at him as if to say that the questions had been going on long enough.

'Is that all?' she asked.

'Yes, for now. But I'd like you to let me know if you have any news of him. I'll leave you my telephone number.'

She took the card he gave her and put it on the table.

'My daughter'll be home in a few minutes.'

'She wasn't surprised that her father has gone away?'

'I told her he's gone on a trip.'

She accompanied him to the door and it seemed to Maigret that now she was more worried, that she was the one who wanted to keep him longer, to ask him questions. But about what?

'Goodbye, inspector.'

He didn't feel at ease either as, hands in pockets and collar turned up, he walked down the street, meeting on the way a little girl with long blonde plaits. He turned round and watched as she went into the courtyard. He would have liked to be able to put

questions to Isabelle too.

5.

Planchon's wife had not invited him to take off his coat, so Maigret had been wearing it for more than an hour in the overheated house. Now, in the fine rain made up of invisible icy crystals, the cool air struck into him. Since his Sunday afternoon walk in the same neighbourhood, he had felt he was getting a cold in the head, which was what gave him the idea of turning left into Place des Abbesses, instead of going down Rue Lepic to find a taxi on Place Blanche. It was from there that Planchon had telephoned him on Monday evening, which had been their last contact.

Much more than the Place du Tertre, now a tourist trap, this other square, Place des Abbesses, with its Métro station, its own playhouse – the Atelier, looking like a toy theatre or a stage set – its shops and its

bistros, was to Maigret's eyes the real Montmartre, the people's Montmartre, and he remembered that when he had first come across it, on a chilly but sunlit spring morning shortly after arriving in Paris, he had thought he had walked into a Utrillo painting.

The square was thronged with ordinary folk, local residents, coming and going as they might in a small town on market day, and it was possible to detect a sort of kinship among them, as in a village.

He knew from experience that some of the older inhabitants would hardly ever have set foot outside the eighteenth arrondissement, and there were still some small shops that had been handed down from father to son for several generations.

He peered through the windows of two or three cafés before he noticed on the counter of a tobacconist's a small cash register that looked new.

This was the one he chose to enter, remembering the background noises overheard during his conversation with Planchon.

He was greeted by a welcome warmth, and

a familiar smell of cooking and wine. The tables, seven or eight at most, were covered with paper cloths, and a slate announced that the lunchtime special was andouillette with mashed potatoes.

Two builders in overalls were already eating at the back of the room. The owner, a woman in black, was seated at the till, in front of a display of cigarettes, cigars and national lottery tickets.

A waiter, his sleeves rolled up to the elbow and wearing a blue apron, was serving wines and aperitifs at the counter.

About ten people were standing there to drink, and all eyes turned towards him. It was quite some time before the conversation started up again.

'A grog!' he ordered.

Hadn't Madame Maigret confirmed that very morning that his voice sounded unusual? It was probably hoarse.

'With lemon?'

'Yes please.'

At the back of the room on the left, near the kitchen, he could see a telephone cabin with a glass door.

'Tell me, does a customer come in here

who has a hare-lip?'

He knew that his neighbours were listening, even the ones with their backs to him. He was almost sure they had all guessed he was from the police.

'A hare-lip …' the waiter with rolled-up shirt-sleeves repeated, as he put the grog down in front of him on the counter, then began pouring wine from one bottle to another.

He was reluctant to answer, perhaps out of some sort of solidarity.

'A little fellow, fair to reddish hair,' Maigret insisted.

'What's he done?'

One of the drinkers, who looked like a travelling salesman, broke in.

'Oh, come on, Léon! If you think Detective Chief Inspector Maigret is going to tell you that …'

There was a burst of laughter. Not only had people guessed he was from the police, they knew who he was.

'He's gone missing,' Maigret murmured.

'Who, Popeye?'

And Léon explained:

'We call him Popeye, because we don't

know his name, and he looks like Popeye in the cartoon.'

Putting his hand to his mouth so as to press it into two halves, he said:

'The gap looks just right for a pipe.'

'And he's a regular?'

'Not really, because we don't know who he is, though he must live round here. But he's often been in, practically every evening.'

'Did he come here this Monday?'

'Wait a minute, let's see, it's Thursday … Tuesday, I was away to a funeral, Nana's, that's the old woman who sold newspapers here … Monday … Yes. He was in here Monday …'

'He asked me for a token for the telephone,' the woman at the till broke in.

'At about six p.m.?'

'A bit before dinner time.'

'And he didn't speak to anyone else?'

'He never spoke to anyone. He'd just stand at the end of the counter, about where you are now, and order his first cognac. And he'd stay there, with his own thoughts. They can't have been too happy. He looked pretty down in the mouth.'

'Were there a lot of people in on Monday

evening?'

'Not as many as now. We don't do food in the evening. Some customers were playing belote at the left-hand table.'

That was the one where the two builders were eating their grilled andouillette, piquing Maigret's appetite. Some dishes always taste better in a restaurant, especially a little café like this, than they do at home.

'How many cognacs did he drink?'

'Three or four, I'm not sure. Do you know, Mathilde?'

'Four.'

'That was about what he usually had. He'd sometimes stay for a bit, sometimes not. He might come back again about nine or ten, and if he did that, he'd be looking pretty rough … I suppose he'd done the rounds of the bars in the neighbourhood.'

'And he never joined in conversations?'

'Not that I know of. Anyone here talk to him?'

The travelling salesman spoke up again:

'I did try once, and he just looked at me as if I wasn't there. It's true he'd already sunk a few.'

'Did he ever get rowdy?'

‘No, that wasn’t his style. The more he drank, the quieter he seemed to get. I could swear I’ve seen him crying all alone at the end of the counter.’

Maigret ordered a second grog.

‘So who is he?’ the waiter asked him.

‘He’s a painter and decorator from Rue Tholozé.’

‘I told you he must be from round here. Do you think he’s committed suicide?’

Maigret didn’t think anything, especially not at the moment, after his long talk with Renée. As Janvier had said, or was it Lapointe, she made him think not so much of a woman as of a female of the species clinging to her mate and prepared to defend him fiercely.

She had not seemed anxious. She had answered all his questions, and if she had sometimes hesitated, that might be because she wasn’t very intelligent, and was trying to understand what he meant.

The less sophisticated people are, the more distrustful they appear, and she had probably not changed a great deal since leaving her village in the Vendée.

‘How much do I owe you?’

As he left, all eyes followed him, and no doubt as soon as the door had closed, they would be talking about him. He was used to that. He spotted a taxi almost at once and went straight home.

He ate his roast veal without appetite, and his wife wondered why he suddenly said:

'Tomorrow, let's have andouillette.'

By two o'clock, he was back at Quai des Orfèvres. Before going up to his office, he looked in on the Hotel Agency, the police squad checking out hotels and lodging houses.

'I'd like you to see if you've got anything on Léonard Planchon. He's a painter-decorator, aged thirty-six, home address Rue Tholozé. It's possible that on Monday night, quite late, he checked into a hotel, probably a cheap one, and probably in the Montmartre area. He was carrying two suitcases. Quite short, fair to reddish hair, and he has a hare-lip.'

They would check their registration cards and visit lodging houses in the area.

A few minutes later, sitting in front of his pipe-rack wondering which one to choose, he called Lucas in.

‘Can you put out a message to taxi-drivers? I want to know if anyone picked up a customer with two suitcases about midnight on Monday, in the area of Rue Lepic, or Place Blanche.’

He repeated the description, mentioning once more the famous hare-lip.

‘And while you’re at it, you could send it to the railway stations, just in case.’

It was routine and Maigret did not look as if he expected much from it.

‘Your Saturday caller’s gone missing?’

‘Looks like it.’

For a good hour, he managed not to think about it, as he dealt with other matters. Then he stood up to light the lamps, as the sky was growing darker.

Suddenly, he decided to go to see the chief of police.

‘I need to talk to you about something that’s been worrying me.’

He felt a little ridiculous to be attaching such importance to it and, as he talked, describing the interview in his apartment on Saturday night, he realized that his account was not very convincing.

‘You don’t think this is someone who’s

deranged, or at least a bit unbalanced?'

The police chief had also seen his fair share of such people because certain among them, by persistence or deception, managed to make their way through to him. Sometimes it was only at the end of their monologue that you realized the whole thing made no sense.

'I don't know. I've interviewed his wife.'

And he summarized his conversation with Renée.

The chief of the Police Judiciaire, as he had expected, did not see things in the same light as he did, and seemed surprised at Maigret's concern.

'You're afraid he's committed suicide?'

'That's one possibility.'

'You just said he'd talked about killing himself. But if so, I don't see why he'd bother to collect his belongings, and go off lugging a couple of suitcases around.'

Maigret puffed on his pipe without speaking.

'Perhaps he meant to leave Paris. But he could have just gone to the first hotel he came to,' the chief went on.

Maigret nodded.

‘I’d like to know a bit more about it,’ he said, with a sigh. ‘I wanted to ask your permission to summon the wife’s lover to come in to my office.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘I’ve never met him, but from what I know of him, he’s rather a difficult character … And I’d like to ask the workmen a few questions too.’

‘Given our current relations with the public prosecutor’s office, I’d prefer it if you could have a word with him first.’

Always the same antagonism, more or less latent and concealed, between the Police Judiciaire and the lawyers in the Palais de Justice. Maigret could recall the time when he was able to conduct an investigation through to the finish without having to consult anyone, making contact with the examining magistrate only when the case was over.

But, since then, there had been new laws and endless decrees, and to stay within legal limits, he had to take care what he said or did. Even his visit in the morning to Rue Tholozé, if Renée Planchon took it into her head to complain, would attract a severe

reprimand.

'You're not going to wait for results from the searches?'

'I've got a feeling they won't help.'

'Go ahead, then, if you insist. Good luck.'

So it was that at five p.m. Maigret went through the small door separating the Police Judiciaire from the very different world lodged inside the same Palais de Justice.

On this side were the prosecutors, the examining magistrates, the courtrooms, the vast corridors thronged with lawyers whose black gowns looked like wings flapping.

The legal offices were solemn and sumptuous compared with those of the police. Strict etiquette was required and people spoke in low voices.

'I'll announce you to Deputy Prosecutor Méchin. He's the only one free at the moment.'

He had to wait a long time, just as other people waited in the glass cage of the Police Judiciaire. Finally a door opened on to an Empire-style office and his feet were treading on a red carpet.

The deputy prosecutor was tall and fair-haired and his dark suit was beautifully cut.

‘Do sit down. What is this about?’

He glanced at the platinum watch at his wrist, like a man to whom moments are precious, and it was easy to imagine he was expected for afternoon tea in some aristocratic salon.

It seemed vulgar, almost in bad taste here, to describe the little house-painter in Rue Tholozé, his Saturday evening recital punctuated by two or three glasses of plum brandy, his tears, and his passionate outbursts.

‘As yet, I don’t know whether this is simply a missing person, a suicide or a crime.’

He summed up the situation as best he could. The lawyer listened, contemplating his own exquisitely manicured hands. Very fine hands with long slender fingers.

‘So what do you propose to do?’

‘I’d like to be able to question the wife’s lover, this Roger Prou. And perhaps too the three or four workmen who are employed in the Rue Tholozé painting business.’

‘Is the man you mentioned someone who might complain and give us trouble?’

‘I’m afraid he is.’

‘Then is it really necessary?’

Even more than in his chief's office, the case was taking on a different complexion here, and Maigret was tempted to give up, to wipe from his memory the little man with the hare-lip who had so grotesquely intruded on life in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.

'What's your idea about this?'

'I don't have one. Anything's possible. It's precisely because I need a better idea that I'd like to call Roger Prou in.'

He had almost given up hoping to receive permission when the deputy prosecutor rose, after once more looking at his watch.

'Send him a summons to come and provide information. But take care. As for the workmen, well, if you insist.'

A quarter of an hour later, Maigret was filling in an administrative form in his office. Then he called Lucas back.

'I want the names and addresses of the workmen employed at Planchon's business, on Rue Tholozé. You can ask the social security office, they must have the lists on file.'

An hour later he was filling in three more forms, since apart from Roger Prou there were only three workmen, one of whom was

a young Italian, Angelo Massoletti.

After which, until nine in the evening, he listened to the accounts of witnesses about the jewel thefts, mainly staff from the hotels where the thefts had occurred. He dined on sandwiches, went home, and had another grog with a couple of aspirins before going to bed.

At nine next morning, a stocky man with white hair and pink cheeks was already waiting in the antechamber, and after a few minutes he was shown into Maigret's office.

'Jules Lavisse, is that right?'

'Also known as Granddad. Some of them call me St Peter too, maybe on account they think my hair's my halo.'

'Sit down.'

'Thank you kindly. I'm more often up a ladder than on a chair.'

'Have you worked a long time for Léonard Planchon?'

'I was working with him when he was just a whippersnapper. The boss was called Lempereur back then.'

'So you know what's happening in the house in Rue Tholozé.'

'Now, that depends.'

‘Depends on what?’

‘On what you’re going to do with anything I say.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘If it means you’re going to talk to the boss’s wife or Monsieur Roger, I’m just a workman who knows nothing. Specially if there’s any question of saying it in court.’

‘What makes you think this is a matter for the courts?’

‘Because when you call people in here, means something’s not right, doesn’t it?’

‘And you get the feeling that something’s not right in Rue Tholozé?’

‘You’ve not answered my question.’

‘There’s every chance that this conversation will remain between ourselves.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘What were relations like between your boss and his wife?’

‘She didn’t tell you? I saw you coming through the yard yesterday and you stayed an hour with her.’

‘Has Prou been her lover for long?’

‘Lover, I couldn’t say. But he’s been sleeping in the house for nearly two years now.’

‘And how did Planchon take that?’

The old painter smiled knowingly.

‘Well, like a man whose wife’s cheating on him, eh!’

‘You mean he accepted the situation willingly?’

‘Willing or not, didn’t have much choice, did he?’

‘But it was his own house.’

‘Perhaps he thought he was in his own house, but really he was in hers …’

‘When he married her, she didn’t have anything …’

‘Yes, I remember … All the same, first time I set eyes on her, I knew he’d be led by the nose …’

‘You think Planchon’s weak-willed?’

‘Maybe that’s the word … I’d say he’s a good fellow who’s had bad luck. He could have been happy with any woman … And he had to pick that one.’

‘But they were happy for a few years …’

The old man nodded, looking sceptical.

‘If you say so.’

‘You don’t agree?’

‘Maybe *he* was happy … And then again, maybe she was happy for herself. But they

weren't happy together.'

'She was cheating on him?'

'I think she was already cheating on him before they moved to Rue Tholozé. I didn't see her then, of course. Soon as she was Madame Planchon anyway …'

'Who with?'

'Anything in trousers. Practically all the workmen he hired. If I'd been younger myself …'

'And Planchon didn't suspect anything?'

'Do husbands ever suspect anything?'

'What about Prou, then?'

'Ah, well, there she'd picked on a tough guy, with his own ideas. He wasn't going to be satisfied like the others with a quickie behind the door.'

'You think he was planning to take the boss's place from the start?'

'Well, in bed, to begin with. Then running the business. But now, if you're going to repeat what I say, I'll be looking for a new job. Not to mention he could be waiting for me round some street corner.'

'He's violent?'

'Never seen him strike no one, but I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of

him.'

'When did you last see Planchon?'

'Getting there, are we? You took your time. I had my answer all ready, thought it'd be the first thing you'd ask me. So, Monday, five thirty in the afternoon.'

'Where?'

'Rue Tholozé. I wasn't working on the same job as him. I was painting a kitchen for this old lady in Rue Caulaincourt. The boss and all the others were working on a new house, Avenue Junot. Very big job. Three weeks at least … I called back at Rue Tholozé at half past five, like I said, and I was in the workshop when the van came in. The boss was driving, Prou was with him, and Angelo and Big Jef behind.'

'And you didn't notice anything out of the ordinary?'

'No. They unloaded the gear and the boss, he went into the house as usual, to change his clothes. He always changed after work.'

'You know how he spent the evenings?'

'I sometimes met him out.'

'Where?'

'In bars. Since Prou got his feet under the table, the boss has taken to hard drinking,

specially evenings.'

'You didn't get the impression he was thinking of killing himself?'

'No, never crossed my mind.'

'Why not?'

'Because when you've put up with something like that for two years, no reason you won't go on doing it for ever.'

'You hadn't heard people saying he wasn't really the boss any more?'

'Oh, it's a long time since he was the boss of the outfit. They let him think so, but really …'

'Nobody's told you that Prou has bought him out of the business?'

The old man known as Granddad stared at him with his sharp little eyes, then nodded.

'So they got him to sign a bit of paper?'

And as if talking to himself, he went on:

'Ah, they were smarter than I thought, then.'

'Prou didn't tell you?'

'First I've heard of it. But it doesn't surprise me. Is that why he's away? They finally kicked him out the door?'

Though that seemed to displease him:

'What I don't get is why he didn't take his

daughter with him. I thought it was because of her he put up with it.'

'Were you told anything on Tuesday morning?'

'Prou told us Planchon had left.'

'He didn't say what the circumstances were?'

'Only that he was sloshed when he came to pick up his stuff.'

'And you believed him?'

'Why not? Wasn't that what happened?'

His gaze became suspicious.

'You've got some idea about this, haven't you?'

'What about you?'

'Oh, me, ideas, you know …'

'You weren't surprised?'

'What I said to my wife when I got home that night was, I didn't think Planchon would last long. If ever a man loved his wife, you could say he did. To the point of being daft. As for his daughter, well, she was the holy sacrament …'

'And you took the van out on Tuesday morning?'

'Yes, we all got in, Prou drove us. He dropped me off at Rue Caulaincourt, by the

old lady's place.'

'You didn't notice anything out of the ordinary?'

'Cans of paint like always, rolls of wallpaper, brushes, sponges, stuff like that, what do I know?'

'Thank you, Monsieur Lavisse.'

'Is that all?'

The old man looked disappointed.

'You want me to ask you some more questions?'

'No. Just I thought it'd take longer. It's the first time I've been here.'

'If anything else comes to mind, don't hesitate to come and see me or telephone.'

'Prou's going to ask me what we talked about.'

'Tell him I was trying to find out about Planchon, how he had been behaving, and what the possibility was of his having committed suicide.'

'Is that likely?'

'I don't know any more than you do.'

The old man went out and a few moments later the young Italian, Angelo, took his seat while it was still warm. He had been in France only six months and Maigret was

obliged to repeat every question two or three times.

One of them seemed to surprise him.

'Did the boss's wife ever make advances to you?'

Because he was a beautiful youngster with large soulful eyes.

'Advances?'

'She didn't try to get you into the house?'

That made him laugh.

'And Monsieur Roger?' he protested.

'He's jealous?'

'I think …'

He mimed plunging a dagger into someone's chest.

'And you haven't seen Monsieur Planchon since Monday?'

That was all for him, while the third workman, called in for eleven o'clock, the one the others called Big Jef, simply replied: 'I dunno' to most of the questions.

He had no desire to get mixed up in anyone else's business and apparently had no friendly feelings towards the police. Indeed, Maigret later discovered that he had been arrested two or three times for causing an affray, and once for grievous bodily harm,

after breaking a bottle over the head of another man in a bar.

Maigret lunched at the Brasserie Dauphine with Lucas, although his sergeant had no more to tell him. The circular to the taxi-drivers had produced no result. That meant nothing, because some of them avoided contact with the police as much as possible. They were well aware that it meant time wasted, facing questions at Quai des Orfèvres, then from the examining magistrate, and sometimes two or three days hanging about in the witnesses' waiting room outside the court.

As for the Hotel Agency, which was one of the most efficient services, it had found no trace of Planchon. And yet, as far as could be guessed, he was not the kind of man to get himself a false identity card. If he had checked into a hotel or furnished lodgings, it would have been under his own name.

The last sighting of him that Maigret could envisage was of a little man, lugging two suitcases down Rue Tholozé at midnight. He could of course have taken a bus to one of the railway stations, where probably no one would have noticed him.

‘What are you thinking, chief?’

‘He promised to phone me every day. He didn’t on Sunday, but then he did call me on Monday.’

Well, he hadn’t killed Renée and her lover. Had he suddenly decided to go away? He had left the tobacconist’s on Place des Abbesses at about eight p.m. and had already had a few brandies. It was highly likely he had then gone into other bars. By investigating the neighbourhood, it should be possible to trace his movements.

Once he was well and truly drunk, what kind of ideas would have gone through his head?

‘If he threw himself in the Seine, it could be weeks before we fish him out,’ Lucas muttered.

It was indeed a grotesque thought to imagine the man with the hare-lip packing his suitcases with all his clothes and personal effects, then hauling them through the streets before throwing himself in the Seine.

Maigret, who still felt a cold coming on, although it had not quite declared itself, took a cognac with his coffee and was back in his office at two o’clock.

Roger Prou did not arrive until a good ten minutes later, and Maigret in turn, as if playing tit for tat, left him twiddling his thumbs in the waiting room until a quarter to three. Lucas had peered at him a few times through the glass.

'What does he look like?'

'Difficult.'

'What's he doing?'

'Reading a newspaper, but he keeps glancing up at the door.'

Finally, Joseph ushered him in and Maigret remained seated, pipe between his teeth, scrutinizing documents which seemed to have his full attention.

'Sit down,' he muttered, waving to one of the chairs.

'I haven't got all afternoon to waste …'

'I'll be with you in a minute.'

But he went on reading, and striking out certain sentences with his red pencil. This lasted another full ten minutes, after which he opened the door into the inspectors' office and gave some instructions in a low voice.

Only then did he look in the face the man sitting on one of the green velvet upholstered chairs. And in the most neutral voice he

could manage, he said as he regained his place behind the desk:

‘Your name is Roger Prou?’

6.

‘Roger Étienne Ferdinand Prou,’ he replied, pronouncing every syllable, ‘born in Paris, Rue de la Roquette.’

Lifting himself up slightly on the chair, he pulled a wallet from his hip pocket, and brought out an identity card, which he put on the desk, saying:

‘I presume you want me to confirm that.’

He was freshly shaved, and wearing a dark blue suit which must be his Sunday best. Maigret had not been wrong in imagining him with bristling eyebrows and thick dark hair, growing low down on his forehead.

He was a fine male of the species, just as Renée was a fine female, and in their aggressive tranquillity, they made him think of wild beasts. Although he had protested a little on principle about the waste of his own time and that of his men, Prou did not allow

himself to be disconcerted by Maigret's classic little gambit, and his gaze was more ironic than anything.

In the countryside, he would have been cock of the walk, the one who on Sundays would drag his friends off to have a fight with the lads in the next village, and who would casually get local girls in the family way.

In a factory, he would have been a troublemaker, standing up to the foreman and creating incidents deliberately, to impress his workmates.

The way he looked and with the character Maigret guessed at, he could equally well have been a pimp, not in the west end of Paris but at the Porte Saint-Denis or in the Bastille neighbourhood: it was easy to imagine him playing cards all day long in a café, keeping a sharp eye on the pavement.

And possibly too, he could have been a gang leader, not necessarily violent, but organizing night-time burglaries, for example in the warehouses round the Gare du Nord or in the inner suburbs.

Maigret pushed back to him the identity card, which was perfectly in order.

‘Have you brought the document I asked you for?’

Prou had kept his wallet in his hand and, remaining quite calm, his thick fingers showing no sign of shaking, he pulled out the paper signed by Léonard Planchon, which made him the co-owner, with his mistress, of the decorating business.

He held it out to the inspector, continuing to display the same disdainful patience.

Maigret stood up, and went back to the inspectors’ office, positioning himself between the two rooms, so as not to lose sight of his visitor.

‘Lapointe!’

And then quietly:

‘Go and show this to Monsieur Pirouet; he knows about it.’

That would be up in the attics, under the roof of the Palais de Justice, where the police forensic lab was situated. Monsieur Pirouet was a fairly recent addition to the team, an odd fellow, plump and jolly, who had been regarded with some suspicion when he was appointed assistant chemist, because he looked more like a travelling salesman. It was facetiously that they had taken to calling

him Monsieur Pirouet, stressing the ‘Monsieur’.

But he had turned out to be a first-class colleague, an inventor brimming with ideas, who had already constructed several ingenious pieces of equipment, and they had also discovered that he was a remarkable handwriting expert.

Before Prou’s appearance in his office, Maigret had already sent an inspector to the social security offices to obtain specimens of payslips carrying Planchon’s signature.

It was a grey day. Fog had started to descend on the streets, as it had the previous Saturday.

The inspector came back to his desk in slow motion, and it was Prou who, despite his cool pose, spoke first.

‘I suppose, since you’ve called me in, you want to ask me some questions?’

Maigret returned his gaze quite amiably, with hardly any irony in his expression.

‘Certainly,’ he said with a casual air. ‘I always have questions to ask, but I’m not quite sure which ones.’

‘Look here, if you’re setting out to make a fool of me …’

‘I have no intention of making a fool of you, Monsieur Prou. Your former employer, Monsieur Planchon, has disappeared, and I would like to know what has become of him.’

‘Renée told you …’

‘She told me that he left the house on Monday night with two suitcases. And you saw him go too, didn’t you?’

‘Now then, don’t make me say things I haven’t. I *heard* him go. I was behind the door.’

‘So you didn’t actually see him go?’

‘As good as … I could hear what they were saying. I heard him go upstairs to get his things, then his feet in the corridor, and the door banged. More footsteps, out in the yard.’

‘From that moment on, he’s gone missing.’

‘How do you know that? Just because a man walks out, doesn’t mean he’s missing.’

‘The thing is, Planchon was supposed to telephone me on Tuesday.’

Maigret had not prepared the questions in advance and this apparently anodyne sentence was uttered on the spur of the moment. Of course he did not take his eyes off the other man. Did Prou’s reaction

disappoint him? He certainly seemed to register a slight shock. Clearly, he had not been expecting this revelation. His bristling brows knotted in a frown. For a few seconds, he seemed to digest the information, thinking over what the words might mean.

'How do you know he was supposed to phone you?'

'Because he promised me.'

'So you *knew* him?'

Maigret, avoiding any answer, carried on stuffing his pipe with tiny gestures which would have annoyed anyone. But Roger Prou still showed no sign of nervousness.

'Let's talk a bit about you, rather. You're aged twenty-eight?'

'Twenty-nine.'

'You were born in Rue de la Roquette. What did your father do?'

'Cabinet-maker. He had, and still has, his workshop in a cul-de-sac there. And since you want to know everything, he specializes in restoring antique furniture.'

'Any brothers or sisters?'

'Just sisters …'

'So you were the only boy in the family. And your father didn't try to take you into

his trade? … I don't think there are many cabinet-makers left now. I believe you can make good money.'

'I did work with him till I was sixteen.'

He was deliberately reciting this in a sing-song way, as if at school.

'And then?'

'I got fed up.'

'You preferred to become a house-painter?'

'Not right away. I wanted to be a racing cyclist. Not on the road, not the Tour de France. But on the track. I raced as a junior in the velodrome for two years.'

'Could you make a living that way?'

'Ah no, of course not. And it was because I realized I was too heavy and I'd never make it to the top that I gave up cycling. You want to know what I did next?'

Maigret nodded, puffing at his pipe while his other hand toyed with a pencil.

'I went early for my call-up to military service, to get it over with.'

'You had a good idea of what you wanted to do afterwards?'

'Yes. No reason not to tell you. I wanted to make enough money to be an independent man.'

‘So what did you do when you got back to Paris?’

‘First I worked in a garage, but that was too boring. The boss was always on my back, and I was working more like ten or twelve hours a day than eight. I tried being an apprentice locksmith for a few months. Then a pal got me a job in a decorating business.’

‘Planchon’s?’

‘No, not at first. With Desjardins and Brosse on Boulevard Rochechouart.’

They were getting nearer to Montmartre and Rue Tholozé now.

‘Were you putting money aside?’

Prou recognized the signal.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘A lot?’

‘As much as I could spare.’

‘When did you start working for Planchon?’

‘A bit more than two years ago. I’d had a row with one of my bosses. Anyway the business was too big. I preferred to work in a smaller outfit.’

‘You were still living with your parents?’

‘No, I’d been on my own in furnished rooms for a while.’

‘Where?’

‘Bottom of Rue Lepic, the Beauséjour lodging house.’

‘And I suppose you met Planchon one day in a café, and he said he was looking for a good workman?’

Once more, Prou frowned at him from under his beetling brows, and Maigret was not too surprised to find that this man’s reactions were similar to Renée’s.

‘What are you trying to make me say?’

‘Nothing, I’m just asking … Planchon used to go to all the bars in the neighbourhood, so it’s natural to think …’

‘You’re way off the mark.’

‘It could of course have been Madame Planchon that you met one day, when she was out shopping, or …’

‘You haul me over here from work to come out with this kind of claptrap?’

It almost looked as if he was going to stand up and make for the door.

‘O*ne*, I never met Renée before I went to work in Rue Tholozé! And *two*, it was *not* her that got me a job with her husband. Clear?’

Maigret replied with a slight smile:

‘Clear. So you answered an advertisement?

Or you were just passing the gate and saw a notice saying a workman was wanted?'

'No, there wasn't any notice. I just took my chances and went in, and it turned out he did need someone.'

'How long was it before you became Madame Planchon's lover?'

'What *is* this? Do you have the right to go prying into people's private lives?'

'Planchon's disappeared.'

'So *you* say.'

'You're under no obligation to reply.'

'And if I don't?'

'I shall just draw my own conclusions.'

Prou gave in, disdainfully.

'Well, about a week.'

'So it was a sudden passion?'

'We just clicked right away, her and me.'

'You knew that it had already clicked, as you put it, with most of your workmates?'

At this, Prou's blood rose to his face, and for a few seconds he clenched his jaw.

'Did you know?' Maigret persisted.

'That's none of your business.'

'You love her?'

'That's my private affair.'

'And how long was it before Planchon

caught you out?'

'He didn't catch us out.'

Now Maigret pretended to be surprised.

'I thought he had found you *in flagrante* and that was why …'

'Why what?'

'Wait a minute, let me get this straight. You were one of Planchon's employees, and when you got the chance, you slept with his wife. Were you still living in Rue Lepic then?'

'Yes.'

'But one fine day, you went to live in Rue Tholozé, and more or less threw Planchon out of his own bed, to take his place.'

'Have you seen him?'

'Who?'

'Planchon. You said just now he was meant to phone you, so he must have been in touch with you. Did he come to see you? Was he making a complaint about us?'

At moments like this, Maigret's expression would become vague and his whole person seemed to embody an exasperating passivity. Without appearing to have heard the question, he looked absent-mindedly towards the window and, still puffing on his pipe,

murmured, as if speaking to himself:

'I'm trying to visualize the scene. Planchon comes home one evening, and finds a camp bed set up for him in the dining room. Well, I imagine he's astonished. Until then, he's had no idea what's been going on behind his back, and suddenly, from one moment to the next, he finds he's lost the right to sleep in his own bed any more …'

'You think that's funny?'

Although he was still apparently calm, Prou's eyes were shining hard and, from time to time, his jaw clicked.

'You love her that much?'

'She's my woman.'

'Legally, she's still Planchon's wife. Why didn't your mistress get a divorce?'

'Because it takes two to get a divorce, and he constantly refused.'

'So he loved her too.'

'What do I know? That's nothing to do with me. Go and ask him yourself. If you've seen him, you know as well as I do that he's no kind of a man. Just a … washout … A wreck … A …'

His voice was becoming thick with emotion.

‘He’s Isabelle’s father …’

‘And you think Isabelle wouldn’t prefer to have me in the house than a man who gets drunk every night, and even goes and cries over her bed?’

‘He didn’t drink before you came to work for him.’

‘Did he tell you that? And you believed him? In that case, everything we’ve been saying is pointless and we’re wasting our time. Give me back my paper, ask me any other questions, and let’s get it over with. I don’t care if you make me out to be the bad guy.’

‘There’s something I don’t understand.’

‘Just one thing?’ he said with sarcasm in his voice.

And as if he hadn’t heard, Maigret went on, still speaking slowly and monotonously.

‘Just a little over a fortnight ago, Planchon sold you his share in the business. So you and your mistress are now the proprietors. I presume Planchon didn’t intend to stay on and work under you?’

‘Well, to prove it, he’s gone.’

‘Still, he stayed for two weeks or more.’

‘That surprises you, doesn’t it, because you

think people ought to do this or that, whatever's the logical thing? I tell you, that man didn't do anything logically. Otherwise he wouldn't have slept on a camp bed for two years, with his wife in bed with me next door. Can you understand that?'

'So, after signing the deed of sale, he was resigned to leaving.'

'That's what we'd agreed.'

'In a way, you had the right to send him packing.'

'I don't know about that, I'm not a lawyer. But we were patient enough to wait a couple of weeks.'

As he listened, Maigret saw once more the little man with the hare-lip pouring out his confession in the front room in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, while the table was laid for dinner behind the glass door. Planchon had certainly had a few drinks in order to pluck up the courage to come, as he said, and when he seemed to falter, Maigret had topped him up with plum brandy. All the same, he had given a strong impression of speaking the truth.

And yet … Even on that Saturday night, had Maigret not felt a certain unease? Had

he not had doubts every now and then, and looked more sternly at the man in front of him?

His long monologue had shown every sign of passion.

But Renée, yesterday morning, although calmer in manner, had been equally passionate.

And even Prou, who was trying to maintain his composure, was now and then gritting his teeth.

‘So why do you think he made up his mind suddenly, on Monday night?’

The other man shrugged his shoulders with indifference.

‘Did he have the three million old francs on him?’ Maigret insisted.

‘I didn’t ask him.’

‘When you gave him the money, two weeks before that, what did he do with it?’

‘He went upstairs. I presume he hid it away somewhere.’

‘He didn’t take it to the bank?’

‘Not the same day anyway, because we arranged things in the evening, after supper.’

‘In the office?’

‘No, in the living room. We waited till the

little girl was in bed.'

'And you had already discussed it together? It had all been agreed by you, including the price? And I suppose you had the cash ready in the office?'

'No, in the bedroom.'

'You were afraid he might take it?'

'No, because the bedroom was our private place.'

'You're twenty-nine years old. You can't have had the chance to save much money until after your military service. So how did you manage to get together such a large sum of money in such a short time?'

'I only had some of it myself, one third, to be precise.'

'Where did you get the rest?'

He did not seem in the least embarrassed. On the contrary. It was as if this was the question he had been expecting the inspector to put to him all along, and he barely concealed his satisfaction, as he said:

'My father lent me another million old francs. He's had plenty of time to put savings by. And the last million came from my sister's husband. He's called Mourier, François Mourier, and he's got a butcher's

shop on Boulevard de Charonne.'

'When did you arrange these loans?'

'On Christmas Eve. We were hoping to finish with Planchon next day.'

'Finish with him?'

'Give him his money and see him leave the house. You know quite well what I meant.'

'And I presume you signed receipts.'

'Even when it's in the family, I like things to be done properly.'

Maigret pushed a notepad across the table to him.

'Could you write down the exact addresses of your father and your brother-in-law.'

'I see you trust me completely!'

Nevertheless, he wrote down the two addresses. His writing was laborious but regular, almost like a schoolboy's, and as Maigret took the pad back, the telephone rang.

'Pirouet here. I've finished. Do you want to come up, or shall I come down?'

'I'll come up.'

And to Prou:

'Excuse me for a moment, please.'

He went into the next office, leaving the door open, and told Lapointe:

‘Go in there and keep an eye on him for me.’

A few minutes later, he was up in the attics, where he shook hands with Moers, brushed past the model used for reconstructions, and went into the laboratory.

Monsieur Pirouet, his face gleaming with perspiration, was standing in front of two photographic enlargements, still damp, pegged up on a line.

‘Well?’

‘I need to ask you something, chief. Was the man who signed these papers a drinker?’

‘Why?’

‘Because that might explain the difference in the handwriting. See, here we have the signature on the social security form: the writing isn’t very confident. I’d say it belongs to a man who is unstable, but still in command of himself. You know him?’

‘Yes, I’ve had him in front of me for almost a whole evening.’

‘Do you want me to give you my impression of him?’

And as Maigret nodded:

‘He’s someone who’s had only an

elementary education, but has always taken pains with things. He is timid, almost to extremes, but has outbursts of pride. He tries to stay calm and controlled, but really he has a passionate nature.'

'Not bad!'

'Something's wrong with his health. He's sick, or believes himself to be.'

'And what about the signature on the deed of sale?'

'That's why I asked you if he drank. The writing's rather different. It could be the same hand but, if so, the person signing was drunk, or else in the grip of a strong emotion. Take a look for yourself, compare the two … Here the strokes are regular, if a little wobbly, as might be the case with a man who drinks but was not in a state of drunkenness when he signed this. On the deed of sale, by contrast, all the letters are shaky.'

'But you think it could be the same man?'

'In the circumstances I just described, yes. Or, alternatively it could be forged. Often when people forge handwriting, you see the same signs of emotion.'

'Thank you. And does the writing here

have anything in common with this?'

And Maigret showed him the two addresses Roger Prou had written down a few minutes earlier. Monsieur Pirouet needed no more than a quick glance.

'Absolutely not, I could explain …'

'Not now. Many thanks, Monsieur Pirouet.'

Maigret picked up the original papers and went back downstairs. He found Prou still sitting on his chair and Lapointe standing by the window.

'You can leave us.'

'So?' asked Renée's lover.

'So nothing. Here you are, here's the deed of sale. I presume it was typed by Madame Planchon.'

'She told you, didn't she? There's no mystery about it.'

'Was her husband drunk when he signed it?'

'He knew what he was doing. We didn't take advantage of him. That's not to say he mightn't have had a few drinks, like always by that time of night.'

'Can I reach your father by phone? You have his number?'

Still looking disdainful, Prou gave him the

number as Maigret dialled it.

'His name's Gustave Prou. You'll have to speak up, he's hard of hearing these days.'

'Monsieur Gustave Prou? … My apologies for disturbing you. I have your son here, and he tells me that in December you loaned him the sum of one million old francs … Yes … I'm with him … What? … You'd like to speak to him?'

The older Prou was distrustful too. Maigret held out the phone to the son.

'Yeah, it's me, Papa. Recognize my voice? Good. You can go ahead and answer the questions he's asking … No! It's just a formality. I'll explain later. See you soon, yes … Yeah, everything's fine … Yes, he's gone away. Not now. I'll be round Sunday.'

He handed back the receiver.

'So, Monsieur Prou, can you now reply to my question? You lent him a million … Good, fine. In cash? You took it out of the bank the day before? … From the Savings Bank? … Yes, I can hear you. And your son, he signed a receipt, did he? … Thank you very much. Yes, someone will call round to check, normal procedure. You just need to show him the receipt. One moment. When

was this? Christmas Eve?'

Prou's eyes glared more than ever with scornful irony.

'I suppose you're going to call my brother-in-law now?'

'There's no hurry. I'm quite sure he'll confirm what you say.'

'Can I go, then?'

'Unless you want to make a statement.'

'What statement?'

'I don't know. You might have some idea where Planchon went when he left the house. He doesn't seem to be very strong. And he was also drunk. Lugging two big cases, he can't have got very far.'

'Well, that's your job, isn't it? Or are you expecting me to find him for you?'

'No, I'm not asking you to do that. Merely, if you *do* have any idea, to let me know, to save time.'

'Why didn't you ask Planchon himself when you saw him, or when he phoned you? He's better placed than me to give you an answer.'

'Curiously enough, he had no plans to leave Rue Tholozé.'

'That's what he told you?'

Prou was the one now asking leading questions.

'He told me a lot of things.'

'He came here?'

In spite of his calm demeanour, Prou was showing slight signs of anxiety. Maigret took care not to reply, but looked at the other man with his most neutral expression, as if he had ceased to attach any importance to the interview.

'One thing surprises me,' he said, however.

'What?'

'I don't know whether he still loved his wife, or whether he had started to hate her.'

'I suppose that depended on the moment.'

'What do you mean?'

'On how drunk he was. Different times of day, he wasn't the same man. Sometimes we'd lie awake listening to him grunting away in the next room, wondering whether he was planning some nasty surprise.'

'What kind of surprise?'

'Do I have to draw a picture? I'll tell you something else. I always made sure to be working on the same job as him, so as to keep an eye on him. If during the day he showed any sign of wanting to go back to the

house, I'd go with him. I was afraid for Renée.'

'You really think he'd have been capable of killing her?'

'Well, he'd threatened her.'

'With death?'

'Not in so many words, perhaps. But when he'd been drinking, he would talk to himself with a sort of knowing tone. I couldn't tell you exactly what he said, it was always a bit incoherent, like this:

' "So I'm just a coward … All right! Everyone makes fun of me … But one day they'll sing a different tune …"

'See the kind of thing? And his eyes would light up in a nasty way. He'd make like he understood himself exactly. And he might suddenly burst out laughing.

' "Poor old Planchon! Poor little feller, a nobody … With a face that disgusts people. Ha! But perhaps the poor little feller isn't as cowardly as all that!" '

Maigret listened attentively, with a tight feeling in his chest, because this did not sound as if Prou was making it up. He'd seen Planchon in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and the man that Prou was now imitating with

cruel sarcasm, the Planchon of Rue Tholozé, was recognizably the same person, barely exaggerated.

'You think he really meant to kill his wife?'

'I'm sure he thought of it, it was an idea he got into his head regularly, when he was far gone drinking.'

'And you?'

'Yeah, me too perhaps.'

'And his daughter?'

'Oh, he probably wouldn't have touched Isabelle. Still, suppose he'd got a bomb and blown up the whole house …'

Maigret got up with a sigh and walked towards the window indecisively.

'And the same idea had never occurred to you?'

'Of killing Renée?'

'No, not her, *him*!'

'That'd have been the quickest way to get rid of him, right enough. But perhaps you'll believe me when I say if I was going to do that, I wouldn't have waited two whole years. Have you got any idea what it's been like for us the last two years, with that man always there, being a nuisance?'

'But what about for him?'

‘He should have got the message earlier and gone away. When a woman doesn’t love you any more, when she’s fallen for someone else, and tells you so frankly, then you know what you’ve got to do.’

He had stood up as well. He’d lost a little of his poise, his voice had become more vehement.

‘But even now, he’s *still* blighting our lives, because you go questioning Renée in the house, you’ve had my workmen in here, and for the last hour you’ve been trying to get me to say God knows what. Anything else you want to ask? Am I still a free man? Can I go?’

‘Yes, you can go.’

‘Goodbye, then.’

And he went out, slamming the door.

7.

That evening, Maigret was able to watch television, wrapped up warm, wearing his slippers, with his wife at his side doing her knitting, but he would have preferred to change places with Janvier and Lapointe, who were just then doing the rounds of the Montmartre he knew so well, walking through streets familiar to him, each of them entering one café or bistro after another, moving from yellow lamplight to a brighter glare, from old-fashioned décor to modern fittings, from the smell of beer to the smell of calvados.

He had of course been glad of promotion, rising in the end to the top job of detective chief inspector, in charge of the Serious Crime Squad. He still retained nevertheless a nostalgia for certain assignments, even if it meant shivering on a winter's night, for the

concierges' lodges that all smelled different, and that you might visit for days on end asking the same, apparently futile questions.

Wasn't it true that in high places he was still criticized for being too willing to leave his office and go out in person on a job that was really one for a bloodhound? How could he explain, especially to the prosecutor's office, that he needed to see, to smell, to absorb the atmosphere of a case?

As if to mock him, the television that evening was showing a tragedy by Corneille. Kings and warriors in costume on the small screen, declaiming noble lines of verse that reminded him of schooldays, and it was a strange sensation to be interrupted every half-hour or so by the telephone, then to hear the voice of Janvier, who always called in first, telling him in much less declamatory tones:

'I think I'm on the right track, chief. I'm calling from a bar in the Rue Germain-Pilon, couple of hundred metres from Place des Abbesses. It's called Au Bon Coin. The owner's already gone to bed, his wife's serving at the counter then going back to sit by the stove. I just had to mention the man

with the hare-lip and she remembered him:

‘ “Has something happened to him?” she asked.

‘He came here often, apparently, about eight in the evening, for a couple of drinks. The cat liked him and would go and rub against his legs, for him to stroke it …

‘It’s a little bar, dim lighting, dark paint. I don’t know why it’s open in the evening at all, because the only customer’s an old man sipping a grog by the window.’

‘Has she seen Planchon since Monday?’

‘No, she’s almost sure the last time he was in was Monday. Just yesterday she said to her husband that she hadn’t seen the man with the hare-lip and wondered if he was ill.’

‘And he never told her anything about himself?’

‘Hardly spoke at all. She felt sorry for him, because he seemed sad, and she tried to cheer him up.’

‘Keep on searching, then.’

Janvier would be going back out into the cold and the dark, and later he would walk into another café, another bar. Lapointe was doing the same elsewhere.

As for Maigret, he returned to Corneille’s

characters on screen and to his wife, who was looking at him questioningly from her armchair.

At half past nine, it was Lapointe's turn. He was calling from Rue Lepic, from another bar, bigger and better lit, where the regulars were playing cards and where Planchon had been seen.

'Always had his cognac, chief … Here, they knew who he was, that he lived up on Rue Tholozé, because they'd seen him go past driving a van with his name on it in big letters. They all felt sorry for him. By the time he got here, he was generally well on the way to being drunk. Never spoke to a soul. One of the card players remembered the last time he came was Monday night. He ate two hardboiled eggs from the basket on the counter.'

Janvier must have chosen the wrong trail to follow, since when he next telephoned he had inquired in five bistros, but the man with the hare-lip had not been seen in any of them.

And Corneille's heroes had been replaced by singers on the television screen when, at about eleven o'clock, Lapointe phoned again,

sounding excited.

‘Something new to report, chief. I wonder whether we hadn’t better meet up at Quai des Orfèvres? There’s a woman here I’m watching from the phone booth, because I don’t want her to slip away.

‘I’m in a brasserie on Place Blanche. The terrace has glass round it and braziers heating it. Are you still there?’

‘Yes. I’m listening.’

‘The first waiter I talked to knew Planchon well by sight. Seems he would turn up late in the evening and by then he wasn’t too steady on his legs. He’d sit on the terrace and order a beer.’

‘Probably to chase all those cognacs from other bars.’

‘I don’t know if you know this place? There are two or three women always on the terrace, and they watch the passers-by. They work mostly when the show is over at the cinema next door.

‘The waiter pointed to one of the women, and said:

‘ “You could ask Clémentine, over there. She might know more than me. I’ve seen her go off with him a few times.”

‘She guessed at once I was from the police, and at first she wasn’t giving anything away. She just kept asking:

‘ “What’s he done? Why are you looking for him? What makes you think I know him?”

‘After a bit, she did consent to talk, and I think what she said would interest you. In fact, I think it’d be a good idea to get a statement from her in writing, while she’s still willing. What shall I do?’

‘Take her to the Police Judiciaire. I’ll get there about the same time as you.’

Madame Maigret, looking resigned, was already fetching his outdoor shoes.

‘Shall I call a taxi?’

‘Yes.’

He put on his overcoat, not forgetting a scarf, having swallowed another grog, since he was still sure he was sickening, perhaps for flu.

At Quai des Orfèvres, he greeted the solitary clerk at the desk, went up the broad, grey, ill-lit staircase, found the corridor empty, switched the light on in one room and pushed the door of the inspectors’ office. Lapointe, hat still on his head, was there, and

a woman who had been sitting in a chair stood up.

At this hour of the night, all over Paris, hundreds of women who could have been her sisters were walking the streets in the dark, not far away from furnished lodgings with discreetly open doors.

She was wearing extremely high heels and her legs were slender, indeed the entire lower half of her body was long and thin. Only from the hips upwards did she carry any weight, and the disproportion was the more striking since she was wearing a short fur jacket, made of something like long-haired goatskin.

Her cheeks were rosy pink and her sooty eyelashes were like a doll's.

'Mademoiselle was good enough to come with me,' Lapointe said gallantly.

And she replied, sarcastically but without malice:

'As if you couldn't have carted me down here anyway …'

She seemed impressed by the inspector, looking him up and down.

Taking off his coat, Maigret motioned to her to sit down again. Lapointe had taken his

place at a typewriter, ready to take her statement.

'What's your name?'

'Antoinette Lesourd. But they mostly call me Sylvie. Antoinette's a bit old-fashioned, it was my grandmother's name and …'

'And you knew Planchon?'

'I didn't know his name. He used to come nearly every night to the brasserie, and he was usually pretty far gone. I thought at first he was a widower drowning his sorrows. He looked so sad.'

'Did he address you first?'

'No, it was me. And the first time, I thought he was going to run away. So I said:

' "You know, I've got my problems too. I know what it's like. I married a good-for-nothing who ran off one day with my little girl."

'It was when I mentioned my daughter that he perked up a bit.'

Turning to Lapointe, she said:

'You're not going to write all this down?'

'Just the essentials,' Maigret intervened. 'How long is it since you first met him?'

'Few months? Let's see, I went to work in Cannes in the summer when the Yankee fleet

was in. Got back here in September. Must've met him beginning of October.'

'And he went back with you the first evening?'

'No, he bought me a drink. Then he said he had to go home to get up early for work and it was late now. It wasn't till two or three days later that he came back with me.'

'To your place?'

'Oh, no, I never take anyone home. My concierge wouldn't let me. It's a respectable house. There's a magistrate even, lives on the first floor. So I go to this little hotel in Rue Lepic … You know it? … Now, don't go causing trouble for them. With all the new regulations, you don't know where you are these days.'

'And did Planchon often go there with you?'

'No, not often. Maybe a dozen times all told, and sometimes, even then, nothing happened.'

'Did he talk to you?'

'Once he said:

' "You see, they're right, I'm not even a real man." '

'He didn't give you any details about his

home life?'

'I'd noticed his wedding ring, of course. One night I asked him:

' "Is it your wife that's giving you all this grief?"

'And he said that his wife hadn't deserved to end up with a man like him.'

'When was the last time you saw him?'

From the glance Lapointe directed at him, Maigret realized he was reaching the interesting point.

'Monday night.'

'How can you be sure it was Monday?'

'Because next day, I was picked up by your people, and I was twenty-four hours down the cells. You can ask your colleagues. My name'll be on the list. They carted off a whole vanload of us.'

'What time was it on Monday when he came into the brasserie?'

'Not quite ten. I'd only just come out, because in Montmartre there's no point starting earlier.'

'How did he seem?'

'He could hardly stand up. I saw at once he'd drunk more than usual. He came and sat by me at the terrace, near the heater. He was

trying to lift his arm to call the waiter and he was stuttering:

‘ “A c-cognac … and one for m-madame too.”

‘We almost had a row. I didn’t want him to have any more alcohol the state he was in, but he just wouldn’t give in.

‘ “I’m sick,” he said. “I need a good big cognac to put me right.” ’

‘And he didn’t say anything else that struck you particularly?’

Another glance from Lapointe.

‘Yes, something I didn’t understand, he said it a few times:

‘ “*He* doesn’t believe me either!” ’

‘He didn’t explain?’

‘No, he just muttered:

‘ “Never mind, *I* know what I mean. And one day you will too.” ’

Maigret remembered the tone of voice in which Planchon, just a few hours earlier that Monday evening, had spoken to him over the phone, when he was still in the bar on Place des Abbesses.

‘Well, thank you, anyway.’

He had sensed not only bitterness and disillusion, but also something like a threat.

‘And you went back together to the hotel?’

‘He wanted to. But when we got outside, he fell flat on his face on the pavement. I helped him get up. He was ashamed, humiliated. He kept groaning:

‘ “I’ll soon show ’em I’m a man.”

‘I had to prop him up. I knew the hotel owner wouldn’t let him in in that state and anyway I didn’t want him being sick in the bedroom. So I asked him: “Where do you live?”

‘ “Up there …”

‘ “Up where?”

‘ “Rue Tholo …”

‘ “Rue Tholo?”

‘Well, he could hardly get it out. “Rue Tholozé?” I said.

‘ “Yes, right up … right up …”

‘It’s not much fun when this happens, I can tell you. I was scared a cop might see us and think I was going to swindle him out of his money. They’d have said it was me got him drunk, you can bet on that. Not wanting to be rude about the police, but you have to admit there are times …’

‘Go on. So you called a taxi?’

‘Not on your life! I was stony broke! I

helped him walk, and we took half an hour to get up to the top of Rue Tholozé, because he kept stopping, his legs were folding under him, and he kept saying every time we went past a bar that another big cognac would sort him out. In the end, he stopped by a gate, and then he fell over again. The gate wasn't shut. There was a van in the yard with a name on, don't know what it was, it was dark. I only let go of him when we got to the door.'

'Was there a light in the windows?'

'There was light coming from under the blinds on the ground floor. So I leaned him up against the wall, hoping he'd stay on his feet long enough. And I rang the bell, then I ran off.'

The whole time she was speaking, the typewriter was clicking away.

'Has something happened to him?'

'He's gone missing.'

'I hope no one's going to start thinking I had anything to …'

'No, no, don't worry.'

'Will I have to say my piece in front of the magistrate?'

'I hope not. But even so, you have nothing

to worry about.'

Lapointe had taken the sheet of paper out of the typewriter and held it out to the woman.

'I've got to read it?'

'And sign it.'

'This isn't going to get me in trouble, is it?'

In the end, she wrote her name in big clumsy lettering.

'So what do I do now?'

'You're free to go.'

'Will there still be buses?'

Maigret took a banknote from his pocket.

'Here's some money for a taxi.'

She had hardly left when the telephone rang. It was Janvier: he had called Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and Madame Maigret had told him her husband was at the Quai.

'Nothing to report, chief. I went all the way down Boulevard Rochechouart to Métro Anvers. I've been up about ten sidestreets.'

'It's all right, Janvier, you can go to bed.'

'Did Lapointe find anything?'

'Yes. Tell you about it in the morning.'

As he went home, Maigret had one overwhelming fear: that he would wake up with a fever in the morning. He felt an

unpleasant tickle in his nose and his eyes were very sore. And his pipe didn't taste as usual.

His wife made him another grog. He lay sweating all night. At nine he was sitting, feeling a little light-headed, in the antechamber of the law courts, where he had to wait a good twenty minutes for the deputy prosecutor to arrive.

Maigret must have been looking serious, since the lawyer asked him:

'So the man you called in is making difficulties?'

'No, but something's come up.'

'Have you found your house-painter, what's his name again?'

'Planchon. No we haven't found him. We've been able to reconstruct his movements during Monday evening. When he got back home, round about eleven, he was so drunk he couldn't stand up straight, and he fell over several times in the street between Place Blanche, where he had his last drink, and Rue Tholozé.'

'Was he alone?'

'No, a street walker, with whom he'd had some dealings, helped him up the road.'

‘And you believe her?’

‘Yes, I’m quite sure she’s telling the truth. She was the one who rang the doorbell before going away, leaving Planchon propped up more or less against the wall. It’s quite impossible the same man could have gone upstairs to the first floor a few minutes later, packed up two big suitcases, and carried them back down before walking out of the house.’

‘Perhaps he took something to sober up. There are drugs, I believe.’

‘If so, his wife and Prou would have said so.’

‘Prou’s the lover? The man you called in? What does he say?’

His head feeling heavy, Maigret patiently explained the story about the three million old francs and the receipts. First, he described the receipt signed by Planchon.

‘Monsieur Pirouet, our handwriting expert, is not entirely sure. According to him, the paper *could* have been signed by Planchon when he was drunk, but the result would have been similar if his signature had been imitated by someone else.’

‘Why did you mention several receipts?’

‘Because on 24 December, Prou borrowed two million old francs, one million from his father, the other from his brother-in-law. One of my men went round and photographed the receipts. The one signed by the brother says the money’ll be repaid in five years, and Prou will pay six per cent interest. The one agreed with the father, on the other hand, is to be paid back in two years, no interest mentioned.’

‘And you think they’re not genuine?’

‘No, they’re perfectly in order. My colleagues checked everything out. On 23 December, the day before handing them over, the elder Prou took a million old francs in cash out of his savings account, where he had just over two million deposited. The brother-in-law, Mourier, drew the same sum out of his post office account, on the same day.’

‘But you mentioned *three* million.’

‘The third million was withdrawn by Roger Prou from his own bank account, the Crédit Lyonnais. So that means there genuinely were three million old francs in cash in the house in Rue Tholozé, on that date, 24 December.’

‘What’s the date on the deed of sale?’

‘29 December. It’s as if Prou and his mistress had made all their arrangements before Christmas, and were waiting for a good moment to get her husband to sign the deed.’

‘Well, I don’t see, in that case …’

As if to compound the difficulty, Maigret went on:

‘Monsieur Pirouet analysed the ink on the signature. Without being able to put an exact date on it, he thinks it goes back more than two weeks.’

‘What do you intend to do? Drop the case?’

‘I’ve come to ask you for a search warrant.’

‘After what you just told me?’

Maigret, not feeling very confident, nodded his head.

‘What are you hoping to find in the house? Your man Planchon’s corpse?’

‘That’s hardly likely.’

‘The cash?’

‘That I don’t know.’

‘You’re really set on this?’

‘Planchon was incapable of walking anywhere at eleven p.m. on Monday night.’

‘Wait here for me, will you? I can’t take a

decision like this on my own. I'll have to have a word with the prosecutor.'

Maigret remained alone for about ten minutes.

'He's no keener on it than I am, especially just now, when the police is already getting a lot of criticism in the press. Oh, well …'

But it was a yes, and a few moments later, Maigret was carrying off the warrant duly signed. It was ten to ten. He opened the door brusquely to the inspectors' office, did not see Lapointe, but spotted Janvier.

'Get a car round to the courtyard, I'll be right down.'

Then he called the Criminal Records department and gave Moers some instructions.

'They should get there as fast as they can. And pick your best men.'

He went downstairs in turn and got into the small black car alongside Janvier.

'Rue Tholozé.'

'You got the warrant, then?'

'Blood out of a stone. I'd rather not think what'll face me if we don't find anything, and if the wife or her fancy man starts kicking up a fuss.'

He was so deep in thought that he hardly noticed that the sun had appeared for the first time in days. Janvier was speaking, as he wove his way between buses and taxis.

'Painters wouldn't normally be at work on a Saturday. I think it's banned by the unions unless you pay double time. So we ought to find Prou at home.'

But he wasn't. It was Renée who opened the door, after having peered at them from a window, and she was more suspicious and ill-tempered than ever.

'What! Again!' she exclaimed.

'Prou isn't in?'

'He had to go and finish off an urgent job. What do you want this time?'

Maigret took the warrant out of his pocket and gave it to her to read.

'You're going to search the house? Oh for God's sake, that's the limit!'

A van belonging to Moers's staff, crammed full of men and equipment, was just driving into the courtyard.

'And who might they be?'

'My colleagues. I'm sorry, but we shall be some time.'

'Will you be turning things upside down?'

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Are you sure you’ve got the right to do this?’

‘The warrant is signed by the deputy prosecutor.’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘As if that means anything! I don’t even know what a deputy prosecutor is.’

But she let them in, eyeing them all darkly.

‘I hope this is going to be over by the time my daughter gets back from school.’

‘That depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On what we find.’

‘If you would only tell me what you’re looking for …’

‘Your husband left on Monday night, did he not, carrying two suitcases?’

‘I already told you!’

‘And I suppose if he did that, he took the three million old francs that Prou paid him on 29 December.’

‘I don’t know. We gave him the money. It was none of our business what he did with it.’

‘He didn’t pay it into his bank account.’

‘Have you checked?’

‘Yes. You told us yourself that he doesn’t really have any friends. So it’s unlikely he would have entrusted the money to anyone else, isn’t it?’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘Since 29 December, he can’t have been going round all day with the cash on him. That would be a big packet, three million in cash.’

‘Well?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Is that what you’re looking for?’

‘I don’t know.’

The experts had already set to work, starting with the kitchen. This was something they were well used to, and they went about it methodically, leaving no corner unexplored, looking inside the tin canisters holding flour, sugar and coffee, as well as in the rubbish bins.

It was done so smoothly, like a kind of ballet, that the woman watched them with astonishment, almost fascinated.

‘Who’s going to tidy everything up after this?’

Maigret didn’t reply.

‘Can I make a phone call?’ she inquired.

She telephoned an apartment in Rue Lamarck, a certain Madame Fajon, and asked if she could speak to the painter who was working there.

'That you? They've come back. Yes, the big chief with a lot of men, and they're turning the house upside down. There's one even taking pictures … No. Apparently they've got a warrant … They showed me a paper signed by someone called a deputy prosecutor. Yes, I'd like it better if you came home.'

She looked at Maigret with a grim expression containing a hint of defiance.

One of the men was scratching some stains on the parquet in the dining room, collecting the dust in little sachets.

'What's he doing? Doesn't he think my floors are clean?'

Another, using an upholstery hammer, was tapping the walls, while all the photographs and reproductions of pictures were taken down, one after another, then replaced, more or less crookedly.

Two men had gone upstairs, where they could be heard moving about.

'Are they going to do this to my daughter's bedroom too?'

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘What am I going to tell Isabelle when she gets in?’

This was the only time Maigret made a joke.

‘Tell her we’ve been playing Treasure Hunt. You don’t have a television?’

‘No. We were going to buy one next month.’

‘Why do you say “We *were* going to buy one”?’

‘Were going to, are going to, same thing, isn’t it? If you think I’m in a state to mind my words.’

She had recognized Janvier, of course.

‘When I think that that one came and measured all the rooms in the house on some phoney excuse …’

They heard a motor in the yard, a door slammed, and footsteps approached. Renée must have recognized them, since she headed straight for the door.

‘See what’s happening?’ she said to Roger Prou. ‘They’re going into everything, my saucepans, my underwear! There are people upstairs in the little one’s room.’

Prou’s lips were trembling with anger as

he looked the inspector up and down.

'And you have the right to do this, do you?' he asked in a voice that shook.

Maigret handed him the warrant.

'And if I telephone a lawyer?'

'You have the right to do so. But all he can do is be present at the search.'

At about midday, there was a rattling of the letterbox and through the window Maigret saw Isabelle arriving back from school. Her mother rushed across, hustled her into the kitchen, where the men had finished their search, and shut the door behind them.

By asking the little girl a few questions, they would probably have learned some interesting things, but unless it was absolutely necessary, Maigret disliked questioning children.

The office had been searched without result. Some of the men now went towards the workshop in the courtyard, while another was climbing inside the van.

They were going through everything with a fine-tooth comb, as the highly experienced experts they were.

'Would you come up here, sir?'

Prou, who had heard it too, followed Maigret up the stairs. A child's bedroom, with a teddy bear still on the bed, but looking as if it was in the middle of a house move. The mirrored wardrobe had been pushed into a corner. None of the furniture was in the right place, and the men had taken up the red linoleum covering the floorboards.

One of the boards had been prised up.

'Take a look in here.'

What Maigret saw first was Prou's expression as he stood framed in the doorway. It looked so thunderous that Maigret called, just in case, 'Watch out, down there!'

But Prou did not make a move, as one might have expected. Nor did he come right into the room, or feel the need to look into the hole in the floor in which they could see a packet wrapped in newspaper.

They didn't touch anything until the police photographer came up. Then they dusted the floorboards for fingerprints.

Finally, Maigret was able to bend down, pick up the packet and open it. Bundles of ten-thousand-franc banknotes, three bundles,

each of a hundred notes. In one of the bundles, the notes were brand new and crackling.

‘Anything to say, Prou?’

‘I know nothing about this.’

‘It wasn’t you that put the money in this hiding-place?’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘And you’re still claiming that on Monday night your ex-boss took off with two suitcases full of his belongings, but that he didn’t take the three million francs?’

‘I’ve got nothing to say.’

‘So it wasn’t you that lifted the lino, forced up the floorboard, and hid the money here?’

‘I don’t know any more than I told you yesterday.’

‘It wasn’t your mistress?’

His eyes showed a slight hesitation.

‘What she might or might not have done is no concern of mine.’

8.

‘What she might or might not have done is no concern of mine.’

That sentence, the tone of voice in which it had been uttered, and the look that had accompanied it remained lodged in Maigret’s memory in the following months.

That Saturday night, the lights were on at Quai des Orfèvres until the small hours. The inspector had taken precautions, advising each of the two lovers to appoint a lawyer. Since they did not know of any, they had been provided with a list of members of the bar and had chosen at random.

So the rules had been strictly observed. One of the lawyers, Renée’s, was young and fair-haired, and as if she could not help it, she immediately started putting on the charm for him. Prou’s, by contrast, was a middle-aged man, with a loosely knotted tie,

a grubby shirt and black fingernails, who could be seen hunting for clients for days on end in the Palais.

Ten, twenty, a hundred times, Maigret repeated the same questions to Renée Planchon on her own, then to Prou, and sometimes to both of them together.

At first, when they were brought face to face, they seemed to consult each other by looks. But as the questioning proceeded, and they were kept separately for a while before being brought together again, their expressions became more distrustful.

When he had seen them for the first time, Maigret had been reminded, not without a certain admiration, of a couple of wild beasts.

The couple no longer existed. There remained two wild beasts, and the moment could be sensed approaching when they would want to tear one another apart.

'Who attacked your husband?'

'I don't know. I don't know whether he was hit. I went upstairs before he left.'

'But you told me …'

'I can't remember what I said, you've confused me with all these questions.'

‘Did you know the three million francs were in your daughter’s bedroom?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t hear your lover move the furniture, take up the lino, and force up one of the floorboards?’

‘I’m not in the house all day long. I tell you I know nothing about this. You can ask me all the questions you want for as long as you like, I’ve nothing else to say.’

‘And you didn’t hear the van drive out of the yard on the night of Monday to Tuesday?’

‘No.’

‘But the neighbours did.’

‘Good for them!’

It wasn’t actually true. Maigret had used a rather crude trick. The concierge in the neighbouring house had heard nothing. It is true that her lodge was on the other side of the courtyard. The other tenants had been questioned without success.

As for Prou, he obstinately repeated what he had said to Maigret the first time he had been questioned at Quai des Orfèvres.

‘I was in bed when he came in. Renée got up and went into the dining room. I heard

them talking for quite a while. Then someone went upstairs.'

'You weren't listening behind the door?'

'If I told you that, that's the truth.'

'You could hear everything being said next door?'

'Not very well.'

'Could your mistress have knocked Planchon on the head without your knowing it?'

'I went back to bed and went to sleep right away.'

'Before he left the house.'

'That I can't say.'

'And you didn't hear the door slam?'

'I didn't hear anything.'

The lawyers approved of these replies, each one adopting the same attitude as his client. At five a.m., Prou and his mistress were taken separately to the cells. As for Maigret, he spent only an hour in bed, and drank off five or six cups of black coffee before returning once more to the uncomfortably grandiose offices of the law courts. This time, although it was a Sunday, he was granted an audience with the prosecutor in person, and remained for two

hours in tête-à-tête with him.

'They still haven't found a body?'

'No.'

'No traces of blood in the house or the van?'

'Not so far.'

Without a corpse, it was not possible at this stage to charge the couple with murder. There remained the money, which, as the receipt made clear, belonged to Planchon, and there was no reason for it to have been under the floorboards in Isabelle's room.

The little girl had been taken to a children's home.

Maigret put in two or three more hours of questioning on the Monday morning, in the lawyers' presence, after which an examining magistrate was assigned the case. These were the new arrangements, which he had to accept.

Was the magistrate more successful than he had been? He didn't know, since nobody took the trouble to keep him informed.

It was not until a week later that a body was pulled out of the Seine, at the Suresnes weir. A dozen or so people, in particular the owners of bars in Montmartre frequented by

Planchon, as well as the prostitute known as Sylvie, identified him.

As for Prou and Renée, they were brought in separately to view the decomposed corpse, but neither would speak a word.

According to the pathologist, Planchon had been killed by several blows to the head with a heavy implement, probably wrapped in some kind of cloth.

He had then been trussed up inside a sack, and there was later quite a dispute between the experts about the sack and the rope used to fasten it. They had found similar sacks in the workshop in the courtyard, as well as ropes used to secure the ladders, which seemed to be of identical composition.

Maigret heard nothing of all this for several months. Spring had arrived, the chestnuts were in blossom. You could go out without a coat. A young Englishman was identified as the jewel thief from the grand hotels and Interpol traced him as far as Australia, while some of the precious stones were recovered in Italy.

The Planchon case came to the high court a few days before the start of the legal holidays and Maigret found himself sitting

with various persons, known or unknown to him, in the witnesses' waiting room.

When it was his turn to take the box, he realized from his first glance at the accused that the passion shared between Renée Planchon and Roger Prou had gradually been transformed into hate.

Each of them defended his or her own position, letting suspicion fall on the other. With unforgiving and bitter eyes, they were watching one another.

'You swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?'

He held up his hand, as he had done so many times in the same surroundings.

'I swear.'

'Tell the jury what you know about this case.'

At that moment, both the accused were observing him with resentment. It had been Maigret, after all, who had instigated the investigation, and it was because of him that they had been arrested.

It was clear that the whole thing had been planned well in advance. Prou had taken the steps of borrowing two million francs from his father and brother-in-law on 24

December.

Wasn't it perfectly understandable, though, to buy the business he worked in from an employer who had become an incompetent alcoholic?

The receipts were authentic, and the money had been delivered, fair and square.

But Planchon had never known anything about it. He was unaware of what was being plotted in his own house. Although he realized that they wanted to be rid of him, he did not know that the process had been started, nor that on 29 December, or round about then, his wife had typed out a false deed of sale, at the foot of which his signature had been forged. By whom? Renée or her lover?

The experts had a field day with that as well, and two of them clashed openly.

'One Saturday evening …' Maigret began.

'Speak up, please.'

'One Saturday evening, when I came home from work at about seven p.m., I found a man waiting for me.'

'Did you know him?'

'I didn't know him, but I guessed who he was because of his hare-lip. For the previous

two months, a man answering his description had been asking for me at Quai des Orfèvres on Saturday afternoons, but he would always leave before I had a chance to see him.'

'And you can formally declare that this man was Léonard Planchon?'

'Yes.'

'What did he want to say to you?'

At this point, the inspector turned to face the jury so that he would not see the faces of the accused.

They were surely stunned to hear that, contrary to what they were expecting, he was making a statement helpful to the defence.

In total silence, followed by such an uproar that the judge threatened to clear the court, Maigret pronounced distinctly the following words:

'He had come to tell me about his intention to kill his wife and her lover.'

Inwardly, he wished he could beg for poor Planchon's forgiveness. But he had just sworn that he was going to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Once quiet had been restored, he was able to reply to the judge's further questions and,

having finished his testimony, he had no time to wait in the courtroom, since he had just been told about a crime in a luxury apartment in Rue Lauriston.

There were no confessions. But the charges were sufficiently serious for the jury to reply in the affirmative to the first question put to them.

Ironically, it was Maigret's testimony that saved Roger Prou's head, as he was granted extenuating circumstances.

'You have heard what Detective Chief Inspector Maigret said,' Prou's lawyer pleaded. 'It was one or the other. Even if my client *did* kill him, it was more or less a matter of self-defence.'

Antoinette, the street walker with the long thin legs and large hips who went by the name of Sylvie, was in the courtroom when the foreman of the jury read out the verdict.

Twenty years for Roger Prou, eight for Renée Planchon, who directed at her former lover a look of such hate that a shiver passed through the courtroom.

'See this, chief?'

Janvier showed Maigret a newspaper on which the ink was still wet, proclaiming the

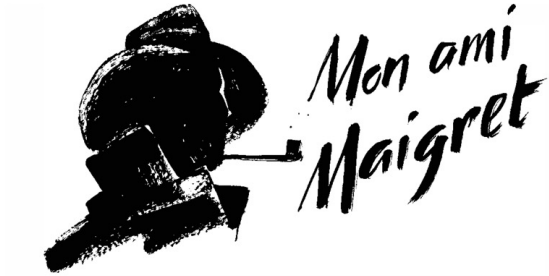
verdict on the front page.

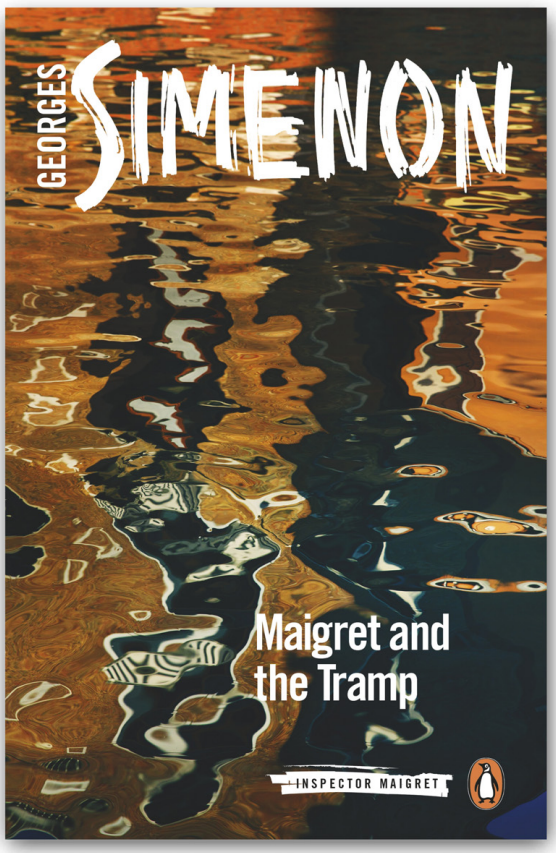
The inspector merely glanced at it, muttering:

'Poor fellow!'

And he was left with a nagging feeling that he had betrayed the man with the hare-lip, whose last words to him on the telephone had been:

'Well, thank you, anyway.'


Mon ami
Maigret


GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and
the Tramp
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

1.

There was a moment, between Quai des Orfèvres and Pont Marie, when Maigret paused, so briefly that Lapointe, who was walking beside him, paid no attention. And yet, for a few seconds, perhaps only a split second, the chief inspector had been taken back to when he was his companion's age.

It was doubtless something to do with the quality of the air, its luminosity, its smell, its taste. There had been a morning just like this, mornings just like this, in the days when, as a young inspector newly appointed to the Police Judiciaire, which Parisians still called the Sûreté, Maigret worked the beat, tramping the streets of Paris from morning to night.

Although it was already March 25, this was the first real day of spring, all the more limpid for the fact that there had been a last shower during the night, accompanied by

distant rolls of thunder. It was also the first time in the year that Maigret had left his overcoat in his office cupboard, and from time to time the breeze caused his unbuttoned jacket to billow.

Because of this whiff of the past, he had, without realizing it, adopted his old pace, neither slow nor fast, not quite the pace of someone out for a stroll and stopping to look at the minor sights of the street, nor quite that of someone with a particular purpose in mind.

His hands together behind his back, he looked around him, right, left, up in the air, registering images to which he had not paid any attention for a long time.

For such a short journey, there had been no question of taking one of the black cars lined up in the courtyard of the Police Judiciaire, and the two men were walking by the river. Pigeons flew off as they crossed the square in front of Notre-Dame, where there was already a tourist coach, a big yellow coach from Cologne.

Crossing the iron footbridge, they reached Ile Saint-Louis. In a window, Maigret noticed a young chambermaid in a uniform and a

white lace cap, like something from a boulevard comedy. A little further on, a butcher's boy, also in uniform, was delivering meat; a postman was just coming out of an apartment building.

The buds had opened that very morning, dappling the trees with soft green flecks.

'The Seine's still high,' Lapointe remarked. It was the first thing he had said.

It was true. For a month now, it had barely stopped raining, and then only for a few hours. Almost every evening, the television showed swollen rivers and towns and villages with flooded streets. The water of the Seine was yellowish, and carried all kinds of litter, old crates, tree branches along with it.

The two men followed Quai de Bourbon as far as Pont Marie, which they crossed at the same calm pace. Downstream, they could see a greyish barge with the white and red triangle of the Compagnie Générale on its bow. Its name was the *Poitou*, and a crane was unloading sand from its hold, with a wheezing and creaking that mingled with the indistinct noises of the city.

Another barge was moored upstream of the bridge, some fifty metres from the first. It

looked cleaner, as if it had been polished that very morning. A Belgian flag fluttered lazily in the stern. Near the white cabin, a baby lay asleep in a hammock-shaped canvas cradle. A very tall man with light-blond hair was looking in the direction of the riverbank, as if waiting for something.

The name of the boat, in gold letters, was *De Zwarte Zwaan*, a Flemish name, which neither Maigret nor Lapointe understood.

It was two or three minutes to ten. The two police officers reached Quai des Célestins. As they descended the ramp to the quayside, a car drew up, and three men got out, slamming the door.

'Ah, we've arrived at the same time!'

They, too, had come from the Palais de Justice, but from the more imposing part reserved for magistrates. There was Deputy Prosecutor Parrain, Examining Magistrate Dantziger and an old clerk of the court whose name Maigret could never remember, even though he had met him hundreds of times.

It wouldn't have occurred to the passers-by on their way to work or the children playing on the pavement opposite that this was an

official visit by the prosecutor's office. In the bright morning, there was nothing at all solemn about it. The deputy prosecutor took a gold cigarette case from his pocket and mechanically held it out to Maigret, even though he had his pipe in his mouth.

'Oh, of course, I forgot …'

He was a tall, thin, fair-haired man, and distinguished-looking; it struck Maigret once again that this was characteristic of the prosecutor's office. As for Dantziger, who was short and round, he was plainly dressed. Examining magistrates came in all shapes and sizes. So why did those from the prosecutor's office all look more or less like senior civil servants, with manners, elegance and often arrogance to match?

'Shall we go, gentlemen?'

They walked down the ramp with its uneven cobbles, and came to the quayside, not far from the barge.

'Is this the one?'

Maigret knew no more than they did. He had read in the daily reports a brief account of what had happened during the night and had received a telephone call half an hour earlier, asking him to be present when the

prosecutor's men arrived.

He didn't mind. He was back in a world, an atmosphere he had experienced on several occasions. All five men advanced towards the motor barge, which was linked to the quayside by a gangplank, and the tall fair-haired bargee took a few steps towards them.

'Give me your hand,' he said to the deputy prosecutor, who was the first in line. 'To be on the safe side, right?'

His Flemish accent was pronounced. His clear-cut features, his pale eyes, his big arms, his way of moving recalled his country's cyclists being interviewed after a race.

The noise of the crane unloading the sand was louder here.

'Is your name Joseph Van Houtte?' Maigret asked, after glancing at a piece of paper.

'Jef Van Houtte, yes, monsieur.'

'Are you the owner of this boat?'

'Of course I'm the owner, monsieur, who else would be?'

A pleasant smell of cooking rose from the cabin, and at the foot of the staircase, which was covered in flower-patterned linoleum, a very young woman could be seen coming and going.

Maigret pointed to the baby in its cradle.

'Is that your son?'

'Not my son, monsieur, my daughter. Yolande, her name is. My sister's name is also Yolande, she's her godmother.'

Signalling to the clerk of the court to take notes, Deputy Prosecutor Parrain now decided to intervene.

'Tell us what happened.'

'Well, I fished him out, and the skipper on the other boat helped me.'

He pointed to the *Poitou*, in whose stern a man stood leaning against the helm, looking in their direction as if awaiting his turn.

A tugboat sounded its siren several times and passed slowly upstream with four barges behind it. Each time one of them came level with the *Zwarte Zwaan*, Jef Van Houtte raised his arm in greeting.

'Did you know the drowning man?'

'I'd never even seen him before.'

'How long have you been moored here?'

'Since last night. I've come from Jeumont, with a cargo of slates for Rouen … I was planning to go through Paris and stop for the night at the Suresnes lock … I suddenly noticed that something was wrong with the

engine … We don't especially like spending the night in the middle of Paris, if you know what I mean.'

In the distance, Maigret saw two or three tramps standing under the bridge, among them a very fat woman he had the feeling he had seen before.

'How did it happen? Did the man jump in the water?'

'I don't think so, monsieur. If he'd jumped in the water, what would the other two be doing here?'

'What time was it? Where were you? Tell us precisely what happened during the evening. You moored here just before nightfall?'

'That's right.'

'Did you notice a tramp under the bridge?'

'You don't notice these things. They're almost always there.'

'What did you do then?'

'We all had dinner, Hubert, Anneke and me.'

'Who's Hubert?'

'My brother. He works with me. Anneke's my wife. Her name's Anna, but we call her Anneke.'

‘And then?’

‘My brother put on his nice suit and went dancing. At his age, why not?’

‘How old is he?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘Is he here?’

‘He went to buy supplies. He’ll be back.’

‘What did you do after dinner?’

‘I went to work on the engine. I saw right away that there was an oil leak, and as I was planning to leave in the morning I did the repairs.’

He kept darting suspicious glances at each of them in turn, like someone who isn’t used to having dealings with the law.

‘When did you complete the work?’

‘I didn’t. I only finished it off this morning.’

‘Where were you when you heard the shouting?’

He scratched his head, looking straight ahead at the spacious, gleaming deck.

‘First, I came up on deck once to smoke a cigarette and see if Anneke was asleep.’

‘What time was that?’

‘About ten. I’m not entirely sure.’

‘Was she asleep?’

‘Yes, monsieur. And the baby was asleep, too. There are nights when she cries, because she’s teething.’

‘Did you go back to your engine?’

‘Of course.’

‘Was the cabin dark?’

‘Yes, monsieur, since my wife was asleep.’

‘The deck as well?’

‘Definitely.’

‘What happened next?’

‘A long time afterwards, I heard the noise of a car engine, as if someone had parked not far from the boat.’

‘Did you go and see?’

‘No, monsieur. Why would I?’

‘Go on.’

‘A bit later, there was a splash.’

‘As if someone had fallen in the river?’

‘Yes, monsieur.’

‘What did you do then?’

‘I went up the ladder and put my head out through the hatch.’

‘What did you see?’

‘Two men running to the car.’

‘So there was a car?’

‘Yes, monsieur. A red car. A Peugeot 403.’

‘It was bright enough for you to make it

out?'

'There's a street lamp just above the wall.'

'What did the two men look like?'

'The shorter one was broad-shouldered and was wearing a light-coloured raincoat.'

'What about the other one?'

'I didn't see him very well because he was the first to get in the car. He immediately started the engine.'

'Did you see the registration number?'

'The what?'

'The number on the licence plate?'

'I only know there were two 9s and it ended in 75.'

'When did you hear the yelling?'

'When the car got going.'

'In other words, a certain amount of time passed between the moment the man was thrown in the water and the moment he started yelling? Otherwise, you would have heard him earlier?'

'I suppose so, monsieur. It's quieter at night than it is now.'

'What time was this?'

'After midnight.'

'Was there anyone walking on the bridge?'

'I didn't look up.'

Above the wall, where the street ran, a few pedestrians had stopped, intrigued by these men having a discussion on the deck of a barge. It seemed to Maigret that the tramps had moved forwards a few metres. As for the crane, it was still drawing sand from the hold of the *Poitou* and emptying it into the lorries waiting their turn.

'Did he shout loudly?'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'What kind of shout? Was he calling for help?

'He was yelling. Then there was silence. Then …'

'What did you do?'

'I jumped in the lifeboat and untied it.'

'Could you see the drowning man?'

'No, monsieur, not right away. The skipper of the *Poitou* must have heard him, too, because he was running along the deck of his barge trying to grab hold of something with his hook.'

'Carry on.'

Van Houtte was clearly doing the best he could, but it was hard for him, and you could see the sweat form on his forehead.

' "There! There!" he was saying.'

‘Who?’

‘The skipper of the *Poitou*.’

‘And you saw him?’

‘At times I could see him, at other times not.’

‘Because the body was sinking?’

‘Yes, monsieur. And being dragged away by the current.’

‘Your lifeboat, too, I suppose?’

‘Yes, monsieur. My colleague jumped in.’

‘The skipper of the *Poitou*?’

Jef sighed, probably thinking that the people he was talking to were not very clever. As far as he was concerned, it was quite simple, and he must have experienced similar scenes several times in his life.

‘The two of you fished him out?’

‘Yes.’

‘How was he?’

‘He still had his eyes open. When we got him in the lifeboat he threw up.’

‘Did he say anything?’

‘No, monsieur.’

‘Did he seem scared?’

‘No, monsieur.’

‘How did he seem?’

‘He didn’t seem anything. In the end, he

stopped moving, and the water kept coming out of his mouth.'

'Did he still have his eyes open?'

'Yes, monsieur. I thought he was dead.'

'Did you go to fetch help?'

'No, monsieur. Not me.'

'Your colleague from the *Poitou*?'

'No. Someone called to us from the bridge.'

'So there was someone on Pont Marie?

'At that point, yes. He asked us if someone had been in the water. I said yes. He called out that he was going to inform the police.'

'Did he do that?'

'I suppose so, because a bit later two officers arrived on bicycles.'

'Was it already raining?'

'It started raining and thundering when the man was hoisted on to the deck.'

'The deck of your barge?'

'Yes.'

'Did your wife wake up?'

'There was light in the cabin. Anneke had put a coat on and was looking at us.'

'When did you see the blood?'

'When the man was laid out next to the helm. It was coming out through a crack he had in his head.'

‘A crack?’

‘A hole. I don’t know what you call it.’

‘Did the police arrive immediately?’

‘Almost immediately.’

‘And what about the passer-by who informed them?’

‘I didn’t see him again.’

‘Do you know who he is?’

‘No, monsieur.’

In the morning light, it took something of an effort to imagine that nocturnal scene, which Jef Van Houtte was recounting as best he could, searching for his words as if having to translate them one by one from Flemish.

‘I assume you know that the tramp was hit on the head before being thrown in the water?’

‘That’s what the doctor said. One of the policemen had gone to fetch a doctor. Then an ambulance came. Once the wounded man had gone, I had to wash the deck, because there was a big pool of blood.’

‘What do you think happened?’

‘I don’t know, monsieur.’

‘You told the police officers—’

‘I said what I thought, right?’

‘Could you repeat it?’

‘I assume he was sleeping under the bridge.’

‘But you hadn’t seen him before?’

‘I hadn’t paid attention. There are always people sleeping under the bridges.’

‘All right. A car came down the ramp …’

‘A red car. That, I’m sure of.’

‘And it stopped not far from your barge?’

He nodded and held out his arm towards a particular point on the quayside.

‘Was the engine still running?’

This time, he shook his head.

‘But you heard footsteps?’

‘Yes, monsieur.’

‘The footsteps of two people?’

‘I saw two men going back to the car.’

‘You didn’t see them walk to the bridge?’

‘I was below, working on the engine.’

‘And you think these two individuals, one of whom was wearing a light-coloured raincoat, hit the tramp while he was sleeping and threw him in the Seine?’

‘By the time I got up on deck, he was already in the water.’

‘The doctor’s report states that he can’t have sustained that injury to the head by falling in the water. Not even during an

accidental fall from the bank.’

Van Houtte was looking at them as if to say that this was none of his business.

‘Can we question your wife?’

‘I don’t mind you talking to Anneke. But she won’t understand you, she only speaks Flemish.’

The deputy prosecutor looked at Maigret as if to ask him if he had any questions, and Maigret shook his head. If he did have any, it would be for later, once these gentlemen from the prosecutor’s office had gone.

‘When will we be able to leave?’ the bargee asked.

‘As soon as you’ve signed your statement. Providing you let us know where you’re going.’

‘To Rouen.’

‘You’ll need to keep us informed of your movements after that. My clerk will come and get you to sign the documents.’

‘When?’

‘Probably early this afternoon.’

That obviously upset the bargee.

‘By the way, what time did your brother get back?’

‘Just after the ambulance left.’

‘Many thanks.’

Jef Van Houtte again helped him across the narrow gangplank, and the little group headed towards the bridge, while the tramps, for their part, moved a few metres back.

‘What do you think, Maigret?’

‘I think it’s strange. Tramps don’t usually get attacked.’

Against the stone wall under the arch of Pont Marie, there was something like a den. It was shapeless, it had no name, and yet – for some time now, apparently – it had been the lair of a human being.

The deputy prosecutor’s astonishment was amusing to see, and Maigret couldn’t help saying to him:

‘You find them under all the bridges. There’s even a shelter just like this right opposite Quai des Orfèvres.’

‘Don’t the police do anything?’

‘If they’re demolished, they reappear a bit further on.’ It was made up of old crates and pieces of tarpaulin. There was just enough room for a man to be able to huddle there. On the ground were straw, torn blankets and newspapers that gave off a strong smell, in spite of the draught.

The deputy prosecutor took care not to touch anything, and it was Maigret who bent down to conduct a rapid inventory.

A cylinder of sheet metal, with holes and a grille, had served as a stove and was still covered in whitish ash. Close by, pieces of charcoal gathered God alone knew where. Shifting the blankets, Maigret exposed what amounted to a kind of treasure: two chunks of stale bread, some ten centimetres of garlic sausage and, in another corner, some books, whose titles he read under his breath.

'*Sagesse* by Verlaine … *Oraisons funèbres* by Bossuet …'

He picked up a booklet that must have been lying for a long time in the rain and had probably been picked out of a dustbin. It was an old issue of the *Presse médicale*.

Finally, half a book, the second half only: the *Memorial of Saint Helena*.

Dantziger seemed as astonished as the deputy prosecutor.

'Odd reading matter,' he remarked.

'He may not have chosen it himself.'

Also under the torn blankets, Maigret discovered clothes: a much patched and paint-stained grey pullover, which had

probably belonged to a painter, a pair of yellow drill trousers, felt slippers with holes in the heels and five odd socks. Finally, a pair of scissors with one of its blades broken.

'Is the man dead?' Deputy Prosecutor Parrain asked, all the while keeping his distance as if afraid of catching fleas.

'He was still alive an hour ago, when I phoned the Hôtel-Dieu.'

'Do they hope to save him?'

'They're trying. He has a fractured skull, and they're also afraid he might develop pneumonia.'

Maigret was fingering a dilapidated pram the tramp must have used when searching through dustbins. Turning to the little group of tramps, who were still watching, he looked at them, one after the other. Some turned away. Others just looked dazed.

'You come here!' he said to the woman, pointing a finger at her.

If this had happened thirty years earlier, when he was working the beat, he would have been able to put a name to every face: in those days, he knew most of the tramps in Paris.

They hadn't changed much, as a matter of

fact, although there were a lot fewer of them.

‘Where do you sleep?’

The woman smiled, as if to win him over.

‘There,’ she said pointing to Pont Louis-Philippe.

‘Did you know the man who was fished out of the river last night?’

Her face was puffy, and her breath smelled of sour wine. Her hands on her belly, she nodded.

‘We called him Doc.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he was an educated man. They say he really used to be a doctor.’

‘Had he been sleeping rough for a long time?’

‘Years.’

‘How many?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve stopped counting.’

That made her laugh, and she pushed back a grey strand of hair that was falling over her face. With her mouth closed, she looked about sixty, but when she spoke, she revealed an almost entirely toothless jaw and seemed much older. Her eyes, though, were still lively. From time to time, she would turn to the others, as if calling on them to bear

witness.

‘Isn’t that so?’ she would ask them.

They nodded, although ill at ease in the presence of the police and these excessively well-dressed gentlemen.

‘Did he live alone?’

That made her laugh again.

‘Who would he have lived with?’

‘Has he always lived under this bridge?’

‘Not always. When I first met him he was under Pont-Neuf. And, before that, Quai de Bercy.’

‘Did he do Les Halles?’

Wasn’t it in Les Halles that most tramps gathered at night?

‘No,’ she replied.

‘The dustbins?’

‘Sometimes.’

So, despite the pram, he didn’t specialize in old papers and cloths, which explained how come he was already asleep so early during the night.

‘Mainly, he was a sandwich man.’

‘What else do you know about him?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Didn’t he ever talk to you?’

‘Of course he did. I even cut his hair for

him every now and again. We have to help each other.'

'Did he drink a lot?'

Maigret knew that the question was rather meaningless: they pretty much all drank.

'Red wine?'

'Like everyone else.'

'A lot?'

'I never saw him drunk. He's not like me.'

And she laughed again.

'I know you, you know, and I know you're not nasty. You questioned me once, in your office, a long time ago, maybe twenty years ago, when I was still working around Porte Saint-Denis.'

'Did you hear anything last night?'

She pointed to Pont Louis-Philippe, as if to demonstrate the distance between it and Pont Marie.

'It's too far.'

'So you didn't see anything?'

'Only the lights of the ambulance. I went a bit closer, not too close – I was scared they'd haul me in – and I realized that it was an ambulance.'

'What about you three?' Maigret asked, turning to the male tramps.

They shook their heads, still nervous.

'Shall we go and see the skipper of the *Poitou*?' the deputy prosecutor suggested, ill at ease in these surroundings.

The man was waiting for them. He was quite different from Van Houtte. He, too, had his wife and children on board, but the barge didn't belong to him and it almost always made the same journey, from the sandpits of the Haute-Seine to Paris. His name was Justin Goulet, and he was forty-five years old, short-legged, with cunning eyes. An extinguished cigarette hung from his lips.

Here, they had to speak loudly, because of the noise of the crane, which was still unloading sand very close to them.

'It's funny, isn't it?'

'What is?'

'That people should take the trouble to knock out a tramp and throw him in the river.'

'Did you see them?'

'I didn't see anything at all.'

'Where were you?'

'When they hit the man? In my bed.'

'What did you hear?'

'I heard someone yelling.'

‘No car?’

‘I may have heard a car, but there are always cars driving by up there, and I didn’t pay attention.’

‘Did you go up on deck?’

‘Yes, in my pyjamas. I didn’t bother to put on trousers.’

‘What about your wife?’

‘She was half asleep. She asked me where I was going.’

‘Once you were up on deck, what did you see?’

‘Nothing. The Seine was swirling about, as always. I called out, “Ahoy there!” hoping he’d answer so I could know which side he was.’

‘Where was Jef Van Houtte at this time?’

‘The Flemish fellow? I eventually saw him on the deck of his barge. He started untying his lifeboat. When he came level with me, thanks to the current, I jumped in. The other man was still in the water. He’d come to the surface from time to time then disappear again. The Flemish fellow tried to grab him with my gaff.’

‘A pole ending in a big iron hook?’

‘Like all gaffs.’

‘Could he have been hit on the head when you were trying to hook him?’

‘Definitely not. We actually caught him by the hem of his trousers. I immediately leaned over and grabbed his leg.’

‘Was he unconscious?’

‘His eyes were open.’

‘Did he say anything?’

‘He was throwing up water. Once we got him on the Flemish barge, we noticed he was bleeding.’

‘That’s everything, I think, isn’t it?’ asked the deputy prosecutor, who didn’t seem especially interested in this story.

‘I’ll take care of the rest,’ Maigret replied.

‘Are you going to the hospital?’

‘I’ll go later. According to the doctors, it’ll be hours before he’s able to talk.’

‘Keep me informed.’

‘I’ll be sure to.’

As they again passed under Pont Marie, Maigret said to Lapointe:

‘Phone the local police station and ask them to send me an officer.’

‘Where shall I find you, chief?’

‘Here.’

He solemnly shook hands with the people

from the prosecutor's office.

Pietr the Latvian
The Late Monsieur Gallet
The Hanged Man of Saint-Pholien
The Carter of *La Providence*
The Yellow Dog
Night at the Crossroads
A Crime in Holland
The Grand Banks Café
A Man's Head
The Dancer at the Gai-Moulin
The Two-Penny Bar
The Shadow Puppet
The Saint-Fiacre Affair
The Flemish House
The Madman of Bergerac
The Misty Harbour
Liberty Bar
Lock No. 1
Maigret
Cécile is Dead
The Cellars of the Majestic
The Judge's House
Signed, Picpus
Inspector Cadaver
Félicie
Maigret Gets Angry
Maigret in New York
Maigret's Holiday
Maigret and His Dead Man
Maigret's First Case
My Friend Maigret

Maigret at the Coroner's
Maigret and the Old Lady
Madame Maigret's Friend
Maigret's Memoirs
Maigret at Picratt's
Maigret Takes a Room
Maigret and the Tall Woman
Maigret, Lognon and the Gangsters
Maigret's Revolver
Maigret and the Man on the Bench
Maigret is Afraid
Maigret's Mistake
Maigret Goes to School
Maigret and the Dead Girl
Maigret and the Minister
Maigret and the Headless Corpse
Maigret Sets a Trap
Maigret's Failure
Maigret Enjoys Himself
Maigret Travels
Maigret has Doubts
Maigret and the Reluctant Witness
Maigret's Secret
Maigret in Court
Maigret and the Old People
Maigret and the Lazy Burglar
Maigret and the Good People of Montparnasse
Maigret and the Saturday Caller
Maigret and the Tramp
Maigret's Fury
Maigret and the Ghost

THE BEGINNING

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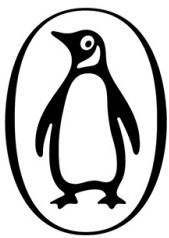

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